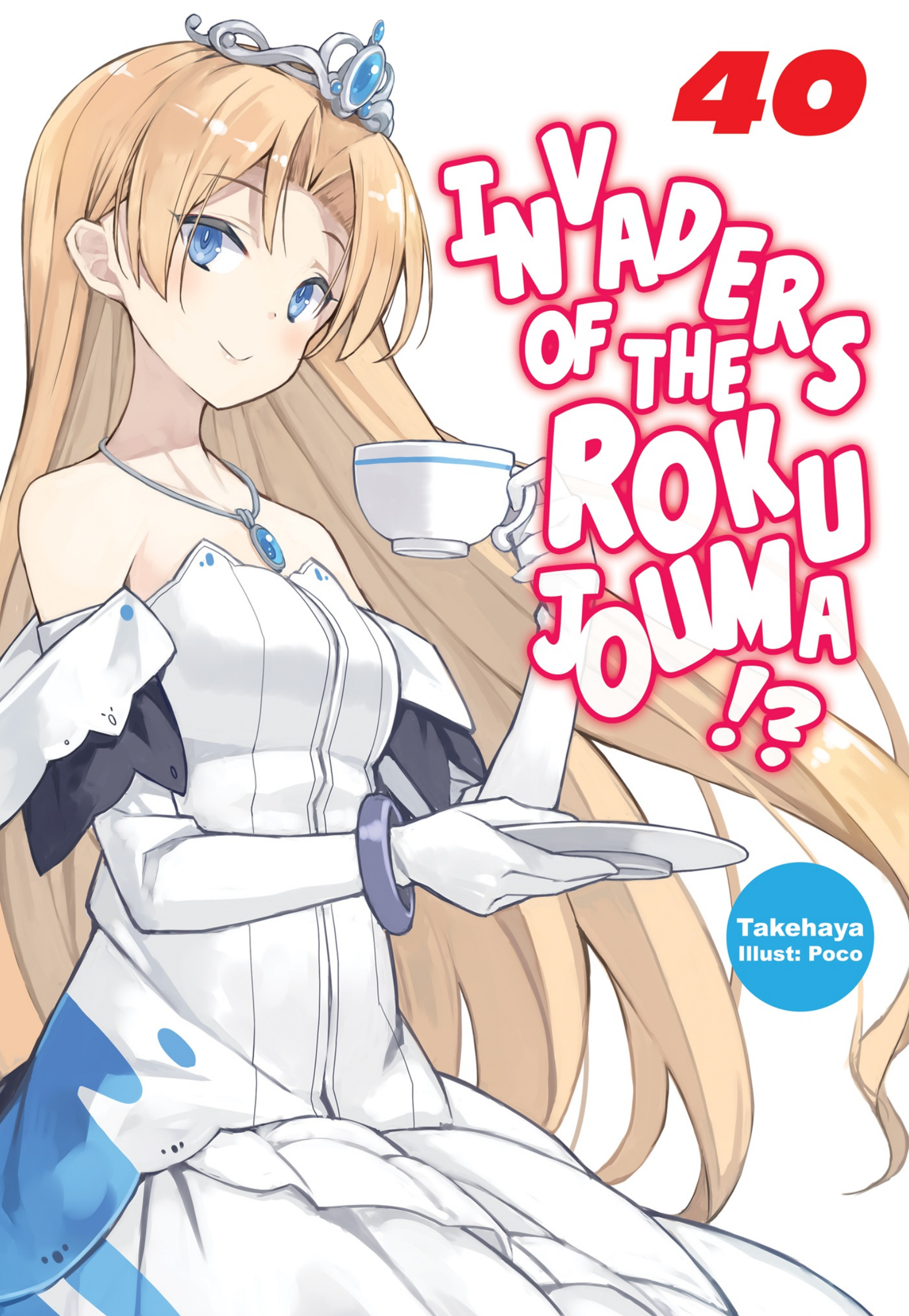


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INVASION OF THE ROKU JUMA !?

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

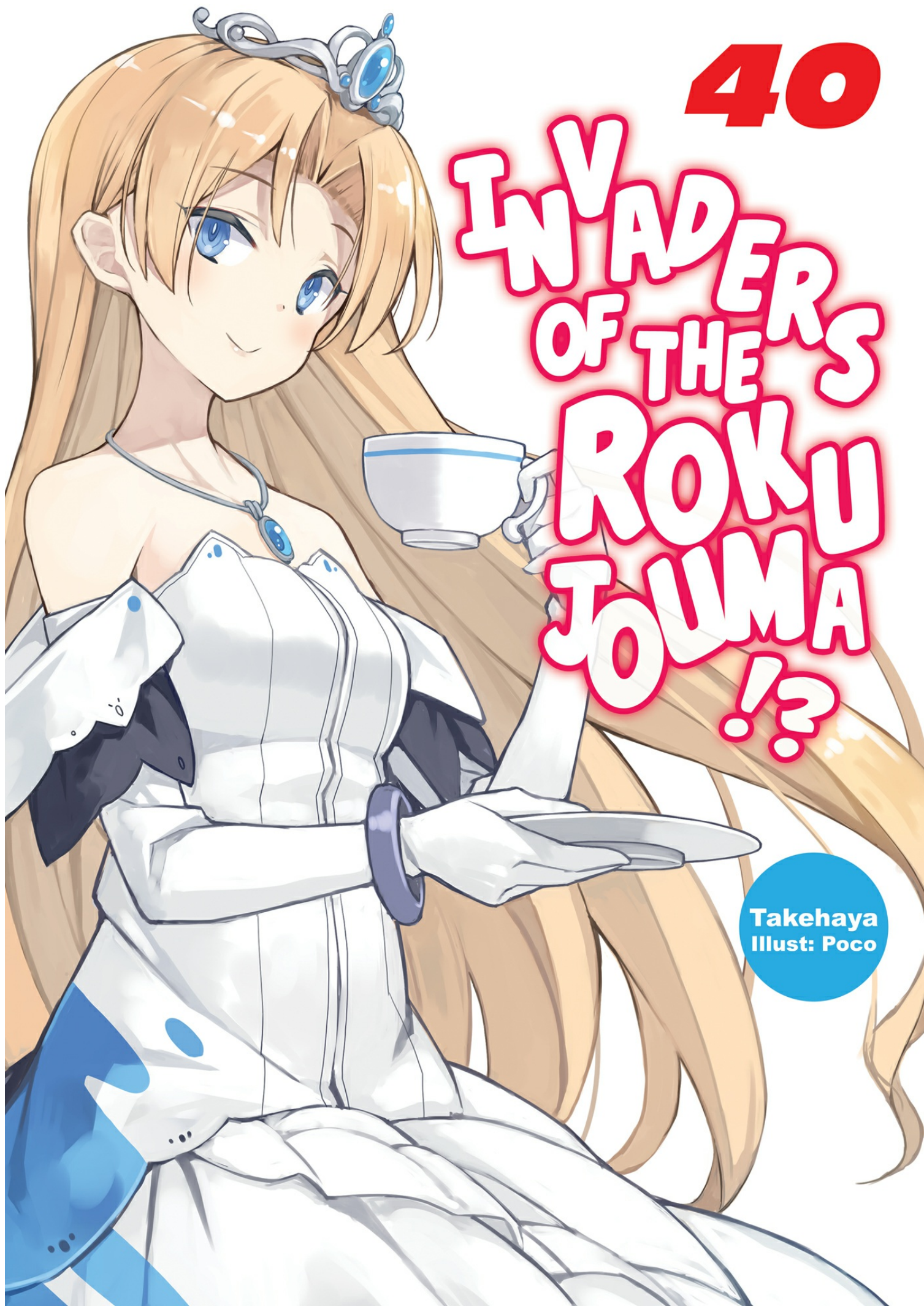




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INVASION OF THE ROKU JUMA !?

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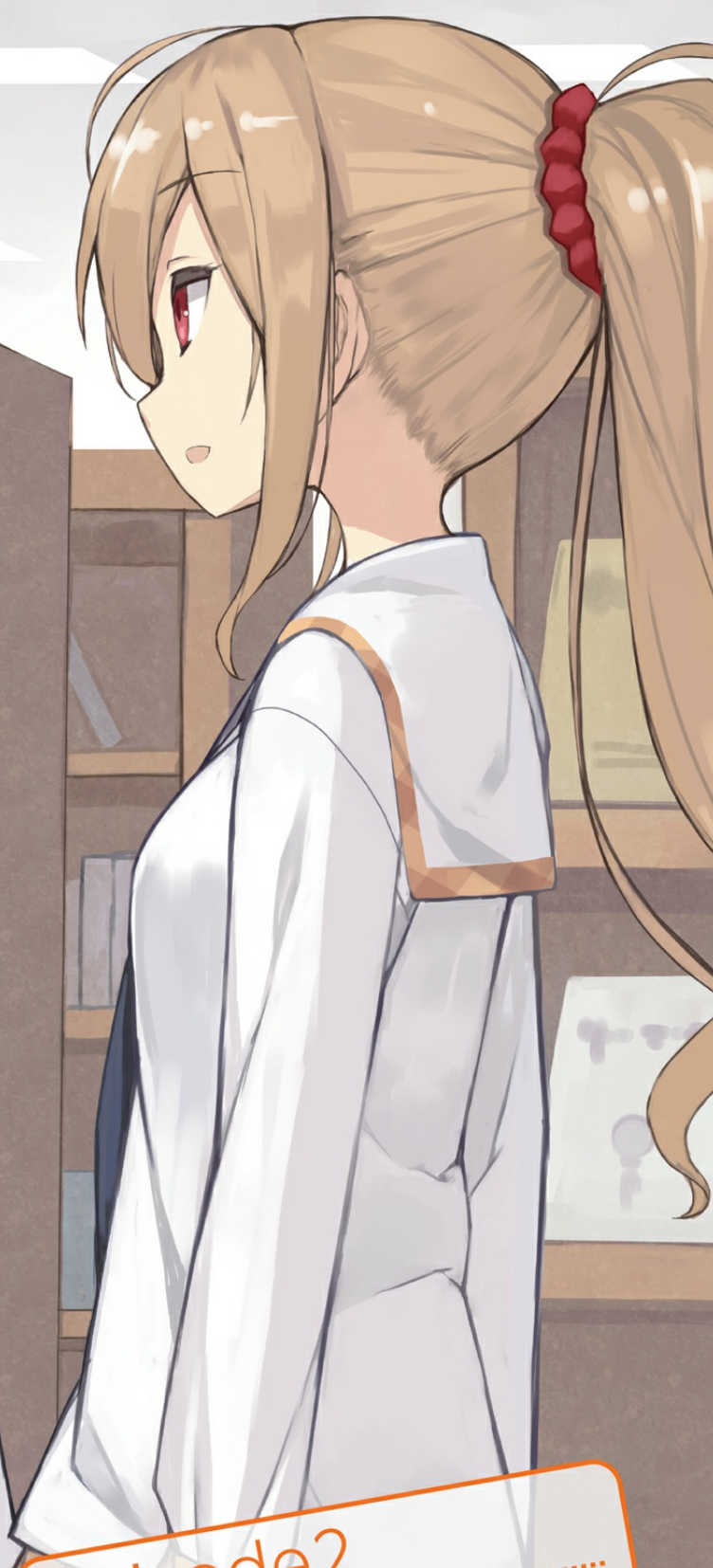


Episode 1

**RACING BROTHERS HANI & HO-
THE FIRE DRAGON EMPEROR
DESCENDS!
LET THE RC CAR BATTLE BEGIN!**

INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 40

**THEY WERE
ENEMIES ONCE,
BUT THEY'RE
STILL GOOD
FRIENDS!**



Episode2
A NORMAL DAY FOR
MAKI AND CRIMSON
TWO FORMER EVIL MAGICAL GIRLS
TAKE A NICE DAY OFF

THE OLD GUARD
ISN'T READY TO
RETIRE JUST YET!

Episode3

**THE NEXT MAGICAL GIRL
AND COOPERATOR**

**TWO GENERATIONS FACE OFF IN A
BADMINTON SHOWDOWN!**

An anime-style illustration of three young women in a room, likely a dormitory, preparing for a journey. The woman in the background has long orange hair and green eyes, wearing a white shirt and a green apron; she is holding up a purple tube of instant noodle seasoning with a panda logo. The woman in the foreground on the left has long blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a white button-down shirt. The woman on the right has long black hair and purple eyes, wearing a white shirt and a brown apron. They are surrounded by luggage, including a brown suitcase and a blue suitcase. A yellow starburst is near the orange-haired girl. Overlaid text in the center asks, 'JUST HOW MUCH STUFF DO THE GIRLS NEED FOR THE JOURNEY?!'. A red-bordered box in the bottom right corner contains the episode title and a notice about imminent departure.

**JUST
HOW MUCH
STUFF DO THE
GIRLS NEED
FOR THE
JOURNEY?!**

Episode4

**IMMINENT DEPARTURE!
THE PEOPLE PACKING!
EVERYONE'S GETTING READY TO GO!**

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Afterword

FACTIONS MAP

KASAGI SHIZUKA

Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House. Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA

Heiress of the underground who's finally found her beloved. With her quick wits and big heart, she's a master of both tactics and love.



UNDERGROUND DWELLERS (OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)

SATOMI KOUTAROU

Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106. Also the Blue Knight.



MATSUDAIRA KOTORI

Kenji's little sister, but you'd never know it. An introvert through and through. She's now enrolled at Harukaze High.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

Koutarou's best friend-cum-partner in crime. He can be a bit tasteless, but he's a good guy at heart.



KOUTAROU'S CHILDHOOD FRIENDS



AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.

MAGICAL GIRLS (OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)

NIJINO YURIKA

The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.



RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



GHOST FORM



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back, however, and is more energetic than ever before.

GHOSTS



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA

Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE

Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but she's still quick to pick a fight.



CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE

Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.

PRINCESS ALAIA



SAKURABA HARUMI

The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul travelled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.



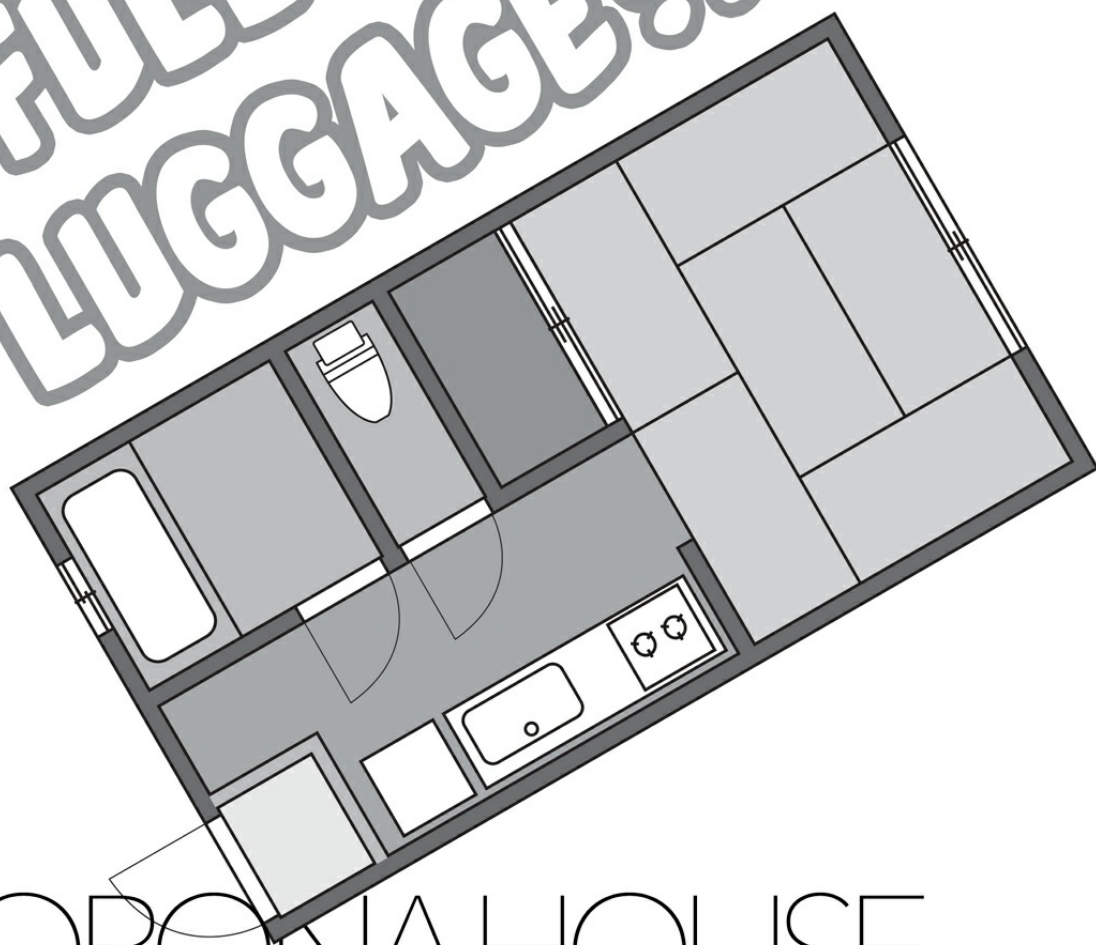
NALFA LAREN

A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...

ALIENS

(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

FULL OF
LUGGAGE?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

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Episode 1: Racing Brothers Hani & Ho—The Fire Dragon Emperor Descends!

Three pairs of eyes were glued to the old TV. Its picture quality was poor, but the three viewers were enraptured by what it was playing. Their hearts soared together as they watched their new favorite anime.

“Ho, ho! Let’s go, Mach Falcon!”

“You’re in too much of a rush, Thunder Tornado! Hit the brakes, ho!”

“What’s the matter, King Castle?! Is that all you’ve got?!”

The three viewers were none other than the haniwas and the Fire Dragon Emperor in his stuffed animal form, and the anime was a long-running children’s program about racing radio-controlled cars. Karama, Korama, and Alunaya were all cheering for their favorite contestants. Drawn by their excited voices, Koutarou looked up from his homework.

“This show’s been around for ages...” he muttered.

This anime was called *Racing Brothers Rough & Road MAX*, and it had indeed been around since Koutarou himself was a child. The series subtitle would change from time to time, but it remained the same show at heart. The current iteration involved a national tournament arc that pitted the protagonists against a secret organization developing illegal motors. It was, and always had been, quite popular.

“Ho! Falcooon!”

“Now, ho! Thunder Tornado!”

“Keep it up and stomp Thunder too, Castle!”

The show had captured the hearts of the few boys in room 106. Without fail, they gathered in front of the TV at 5:30 PM every Friday.

“Well, it’s not like I don’t get the appeal,” Koutarou continued.

Even though the haniwas and Alunaya were making a racket while he was trying to do his homework, Koutarou understood how they felt. The haniwas had spent most of their lives underground, and Alunaya hailed from an entirely different world. Moreover, the show was only half an hour long, so he saw no need to scold them over a little fuss. And most of all, he'd been a fan of the show himself once upon a time.

"So this is what it looks like nowadays... I had no idea it was so intense."

Eventually, Koutarou was drawn into watching it with them. The episode reached a race scene in the back half, which felt like the perfect time for a homework break. Once the ending and next episode preview rolled, Koutarou got back to work. He'd been struggling with a particular math problem, but he was now able to solve it with ease. In the end, the break had been beneficial.

As he moved on to the next problem, Karama came tugging at his sleeve. "Big Brother, Big Brother!"

"Hm?" Koutarou looked over and saw the haniwas on either side of Alunaya. For some reason, their eyes were sparkling.

"Blue Knight," began Alunaya, "you may be busy, but I implore you to hear us out."

"Big Brother, we have a request for you! Ho!"

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime favor, ho!"

Their eyes still aglitter, all three slowly closed in. Koutarou could now sense that—whatever they were going to ask—this was going to be big. When he glanced at them and then the TV behind them, it all fell into place.

"You don't need to say another word," he announced, standing up and making for the door. "Let's go!"

"Blue Knight?"

"Ho? Where are you going?"

This left Alunaya and the haniwas perplexed. They followed after Koutarou, albeit with puzzled looks on their little faces. Koutarou stopped in the doorway and turned around.

“Where else? We’re gonna hit the hobby shop by the station,” he informed them.

His intention was to go buy some remote-controlled cars. He figured that was the “favor” they wanted to ask him, but the anime had piqued his interest in RC cars too. He felt like checking them out again himself. It was just past six o’clock, so the store should still be open. If they wanted to act today, now was the time.

“That’s our Big Brother! He knows what’s up, ho!”

“Expect no less of the man Ane-san has chosen, ho!”

“Let us depart to the sacred place of radio-controlled devices!”

“Ho!”

“Ho-oh!”

Once the haniwas and Alunaya realized what Koutarou was up to, they quickly scrambled after him. They didn’t want to be left behind, and they wanted to get their hands on their own cars as soon as possible.

Koutarou received a salary from Theia, who enjoyed acting the part of his liege. Considering their close relationship, however, he never spent the money she gave him on himself. He only used it for purchases that everyone could enjoy together—like splurging on sukiyaki for dinner or planning a group vacation. And by that logic, springing for RC cars for the boys was an acceptable expense. Koutarou believed this would be a good opportunity to bond with Alunaya and the haniwas.

Because Kisshouharukaze City was far from the bigger city centers of Japan, land was fairly inexpensive. There were RC tracks all over town, making Kisshouharukaze quite a draw for enthusiasts. The hobby shop by the station—the largest in the neighborhood—was indeed a sacred place of sorts. At 6:30 in the evening, the store was packed. This was a prime shopping hour for anyone on their way home from work or school.

“Ho! There are so many RC cars, ho!”

“And so many customers, ho!”

“I knew this would be a sport for the masses! All the more worth challenging!”

Even before entering the store, the three tiny figures were ecstatic. As soon as they saw the illuminated shop sign in the distance, they took off running and left Koutarou in the dust. They were behaving like children, but Koutarou understood that too. He’d done the same once himself, so instead of scolding them, he let them have their fun. They were cloaked at the moment so other people couldn’t see or hear them, so it wasn’t an issue anyway.

“Hmm, they offer more prebuilt models than they used to... Well, I guess being able to play with them right out of the box makes them more accessible for new fans.”

Even Koutarou started to get excited when he stepped inside the store. It had always had a large selection of goods, but its current stock was almost mind-blowing. There were several shelves devoted to controllers alone, and the cars themselves had entire aisles.

“As long as we get a body, I could do a nostalgic build... But there’re so many options, I hardly know what to pick.”

Individual car parts took up almost as much space. With such a wide selection, buyers could make their own machines from scratch. As Koutarou browsed, he could feel his old passion for RC cars being reignited.

“Oh?” When he left the parts section and headed to the paint aisle, he spotted a familiar face in the store. “What are you doing here, Clan?”

“My... what an unusual place to run into each other, Veltlion.” Indeed, Koutarou had laid eyes on Clan. When she noticed him, she put the solvent she was holding back on the shelf. “I’ve been coming here for paints and solvents for some time.”

“Oh, right. I guess this place is like a gold mine for you.”

Clan was in possession of a great deal of advanced technology and frequently developed her own. The invention process, however, required materials to work with, and since she was far from Forthorthe, she would quickly exhausted

her supply if she stuck to Forthorthian materials. To prevent this, she sourced locally on Earth whenever she could. That was particularly true for paints which, aside from special cases, were as good as their Forthorthian counterparts. Clan was actually a frequent shopper at the hobby shop.

“So, what brings you here, Veltlion?” she asked. “Ah, I suppose you’re here for the store’s intended purpose.”

“Yeah. We came to pick up some RC cars.”

“Hmm? ‘We’?” Clan echoed with a mystified look. She couldn’t think of anyone else from room 106 who was into model cars and the like.

“See for yourself,” Koutarou replied.

“Ho! To think they’ve already produced a Falcon with its Brave Wing gear, ho!”

“They have Thunder Tornado’s Big Wheels too, ho!”

“What is this one?! There’s a bear riding it!”

“I see,” remarked Clan. “So they dragged you here.”

Once she realized the haniwas and Alunaya were with Koutarou, Clan nodded sagely. It wasn’t hard at all to imagine they were the ones behind this. Koutarou was just a chaperone.

“Not exactly,” he corrected her. “I used to be into this kind of stuff, so I’m tagging along for nostalgia kicks.”

“I see.”

“So yeah, I’ll see you later.”

“Huh? Ah, yes... See you later...”

Koutarou turned around and headed over to where the haniwas and Alunaya were excitedly shouting without even glancing back. It was all so casual that Clan found it anticlimactic.

Are RC cars more important than me...?

Clan had no interest in RC cars. In her eyes, they were a boyish hobby. Moreover, her lack of coordination was a serious hurdle. She couldn’t imagine

she'd be any good with them. They had thus never sparked her curiosity before.

"Hold on, Veltlion!"

"Hmm?"

But that changed in an instant when she found out Koutarou was into them. What hobby could possibly be so engaging that he would leave her in the dust like that? So, with a mix of interest and jealousy, she chased after him.

Koutarou and the others set about picking out their cars. While they could have easily gone with the prebuilt kind, they all found themselves in the DIY section of the hobby shop. Their rationale? Because that's how the protagonists of *Racing Brothers* rolled.

"If you don't put your own machine together, it won't have a soul, ho!"

"I have no interest in a mere toy, ho! What I need is a partner that'll stick with me through thick and thin, ho!"

"Indeed! How can one truly bond with their vehicle if they do not understand its constituent components? An emperor must design a machine of his own!"

"Nice," Koutarou remarked. "You guys really get what this is all about."

"Big Brother, should I get this kit, ho?"

"There's no Thunder Tornado kit, ho!"

"I happened to notice there was a Thunder Tornado body in the previous section of this fine establishment, so you could procure that alongside a kit, could you not?"

"Yeah," answered Koutarou. "That's how you do it."

Since this would be the first time the haniwas and Alunaya were building models themselves, they didn't want to go too overboard. Still, buying a premade car would be too boring. As a compromise, they decided on kits that contained everything they'd need to get started (except for spare batteries). And in the event that there weren't kits they liked, they could always buy other bodies alongside them. Bodies were comparatively cheap and easy enough to swap out, making kits the perfect introduction for any beginner.

“Ho-oh? You’re getting a jeep, Big Brother?”

“In the show, ho, they said that those can do wheelies but they’re difficult to control!”

“I’m not letting a little difficulty get between me and my dreams!”

Koutarou had chosen a perennially popular large-wheeled jeep model. Its center of gravity was in the rear, so when rapidly accelerating, the front of the vehicle would pop up in wheelie fashion. It was a fun gimmick, but overall, it was a weakness in the design. Jeeps required more care when taking sharp turns, for example. But since the other three were complete beginners, Koutarou felt a little handicap would be fine. He’d always wanted to try one when he was a kid, anyway.

“A fine decision, Blue Knight.”

“Theia-chan’s always talking about that kind of stuff too, ho!”

“And Uncle Dragon picked a tractor, ho! That was unexpected, ho!”

“I shall paint it this color. Let’s see... Eminent Red!”

“The perfect color for an emperor, ho!”

Alunaya had chosen a model manufactured as a special cross-promotion with a local mascot character. It looked like a tractor, but only on the outside. Inside, it used the same parts as other cars, so it was actually a prized model for its lightness. It also had a tiny bear sitting in the driver’s seat. Painted red, it would be quite flashy.

“Karama, don’t you want the Brave Wing gear for your Falcon too?” Koutarou asked.

“Ho-oh! They have that?!”

“It’s popular, so they have the parts for it, at least.”

“I got Thunder’s Big Wheels, ho!”

Karama and Korama had selected the models that the titular brothers in the anime used. They had dynamic designs you would never see on real vehicles, but such fantastic details were another small joy of RC cars. Before long, the

two main cars straight out of the anime would be racing alongside each other.

“Hmm...”

Clan had been watching the boys pick out their cars and was slowly starting to come around. She'd only ever seen RC vehicles as children's playthings, but it seemed there was more to them.

“These are surprisingly complex...”

She looked at the various kits surrounding her and began to appreciate the appeal of the hobby. By combining all kinds of parts, she could personalize her very own car to race with. These models were smaller and cheaper than real cars, making the sport far more accessible—meaning there were far more competitors too. Climbing to the top of the RC world was potentially even more difficult than climbing to the top of the real racing world.

“Besides...”

In truth, Clan was feeling left out. Koutarou and the others were happily talking about this and that, but she had nothing to add or offer to the conversation. It was alienating.

If I joined in... If I made my own machine and joined the races...

From Clan's point of view, RC cars were just small machines built with basic technology. Nevertheless, that was right in her wheelhouse. She might enjoy playing around with one. It might provide some fulfillment beyond just assisting her with her research. That feeling gave her a little push.

“Veltlion,” she called out.

“What is it?” Koutarou replied.

“I've decided to try RC cars too.”

Thus Clan took a bold step forward. Basic or not, the idea of chatting with Koutarou and the others about technology was appealing to her.

“Really? Color me surprised... Wait, I guess this is actually right up your alley.”

“That's right. The goal is to compact as much technology as possible into a tight space, isn't it?”

“Hmm, well, I guess. But be careful. Overdoing it tends to backfire.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? I do harder things on a daily basis.”

“Yeah, guess I’m preaching to the choir. But this should be interesting, I gotta say.”

“We welcome you, ho!”

“Just like in the show, a new rival has appeared at a most unexpected time! Ahaha, splendid!”

“That’s right, ho! Clan-chan will be a powerful rival, ho!”

The group happily welcomed Clan. Although her coordination left much to be desired, her skill with technology was second to none. She would undoubtedly be a good addition to their team, and their upcoming showdown would be all the more interesting with her present.

Since Clan joined in late, everyone else helped her shop. While she knew everything there was to know about technology, she knew next to nothing about RC cars. Everyone’s advice was appreciated.

“So what kind of design catches your eye, Clan? One based on a real car? Or something funky you’d only see in an RC model?” Koutarou asked.

“Is there no appreciable difference in performance?” Clan asked in turn.

“Not really. They’re all built for racing, so the batteries and motors are pretty much all regulation.”

Koutarou and the others weren’t planning to participate in any official races, but they were still abiding by the rules of the sport. That was what the haniwas and Alunaya wanted, because they wanted to play just like the characters in the show did.

“The ideal model would be the one with the heaviest parts to take advantage of my strengths.”

“So that’s your strategy, huh? Then you should go with the buggy style. They’re longtime bestsellers and have lots of models, so there are tons of parts available.”

Koutarou's explanation was easy to understand, but Clan was stumped by something else.

"What's with that face?" he asked.

"Nothing... You just aren't teasing me like normal. It feels a little weird," she replied.

It was rare for Koutarou to stay so serious for so long without cracking a joke at her expense—at least, not without a battle ahead of them. Clan hardly knew what to make of it.

"Ribbing you now would only jeopardize our race. Besides, it's in poor taste to heckle a beginner. I know when to quit."

"O-Of course. Sorry."

Deciding to take part in a hobby of Koutarou's was already paying dividends for Clan.

It's true that there's no point in trying to bring down someone you're playing with. Come to think of it, I'm never that considerate around Veltlion...

That in and of itself was one reason Koutarou teased Clan so much, but he laid off whenever they were working together on something. He was the same way when sewing with Harumi or playing video games with Theia. He saw them as teammates. It was just uncommon for him to share a mutual interest with Clan like this.

He's also like this when he's helping me with my research or when we're in battle... Or when he's practicing, for that matter. I see... So that's what's going on!

Clan came to the realization that she'd been more withdrawn than she thought. In light of this, she was glad she'd decided to take the plunge with RC cars.

"So, you gonna do any modifications?" Koutarou asked her, returning to the subject of her car.

"No, not at first," she replied. "I'm going to build the model and make my modifications afterward."

“Well said, Clan-chan! Ho!”

“You’re just like Yama-san from the pit crew, ho!”

“Ah, jeez,” Koutarou sighed. “You’re gonna go all out, aren’t you?”

“Of course. This is a race, you know.”

“Beginner or not, I can’t underestimate you.”

“Indeed! We had best not let our guard down against the other half of the legendary duo who saved Forthorthe of yore! Ahahaha, my excitement for our coming showdown only grows!”

Like Koutarou, the haniwas and Alunaya acknowledged Clan as a rival. Everyone wanted a fair fight—to beat the others with their own masterfully crafted machine. Tensions were high. And Clan was sure they were going to have fun together.

Alunaya in stuffed animal form danced atop Koutarou’s head while the haniwas rolled around on the floor next to him. Koutarou was extremely difficult to wake, but not even he could sleep forever with this kind of interference. Eventually, he tiredly opened his eyes.

“Ho! Wake up, Brother!”

“It’s morning, ho!”

“What’s with all the fuss so early...?”

Just roused from a deep slumber, Koutarou couldn’t entirely process what was happening. Alunaya, who was still jumping up and down on his head, decided to fill him in.

“Rise, Blue Knight! We pledged to play with our RC cars today!”

“Ah, yeah, I guess we did...”

With that, Koutarou let out a big yawn and got up. He had indeed promised the haniwas and Alunaya that they would play together on the weekend. They were so excited about it that they’d woken Koutarou up first thing.

“Oh? You’re here too, Clan?”

Once he was up, Koutarou spotted the pink-haired princess too.

“G-Good morning, Veltlion.”

“Morning. Did these guys wake you up too?”

“No... That’s not...”

Koutarou figured Clan had gotten the same treatment, but she was acting odd. Evasive and awkward.

“Clan-chan was already here when we showed up, ho!”

“She was pondering how to wake you, ho!”

“Oh, so you’re *with* them.”

“S-So what if I am?!”

Clan had in fact been the first to rise that morning. She was so impatient for the day that she’d set out for room 106 just as soon as she’d awoken. Being able to share a hobby with friends meant the world to her.

“If you were already here, you could’ve just woken me up. We’ve got lots to do, you know.”

Of course, Koutarou had no complaints. He’d been looking forward to the occasion himself, and putting together RC cards wasn’t exactly quick work. Getting a head start would be critical. He shared Clan and the others’ enthusiasm—he just hadn’t woken up as early.

“But how was I supposed to wake you up?”

“At times like this, it’s okay to pinch me. I wouldn’t be mad.”

“R-Really? Then that’s what I’ll do next time.”

With that, a smile returned to Clan’s face. Of course, it wasn’t just her. All five friends were happily smiling.

When building an RC car, the most time-consuming part was detailing the body. The work itself didn’t take all that long, but there was something else to take into consideration.

“Big Brother, why are you starting with the body, ho?”

“Shouldn’t you start with the insides, ho?”

“It takes a while for the paint to dry.”

“He’s right. Even with the heat machine in my lab, it’ll take more than two hours,” Clan added.

“Aha, brilliant! So we paint before beginning with the machinery, do we?” Alunaya chimed in.

“Yup. The paint should be dry by the time we’re done with all that.”

Accordingly, painting the body of the car before getting to work on anything else was a matter of efficiency. If you began with the machinery instead, you would be left with downtime while waiting for the paint to dry at the end. There were certain car models that required preinstalling particular parts to determine their positioning, but fortunately, that wasn’t the case for any of the cars that Koutarou and the others had purchased.

“Since everyone has a plastic body, we need to start with a primer for a good foundation. Actually, maybe we should even sand these down first,” Koutarou suggested.

“That won’t be necessary,” Clan replied. “I did some light sandblasting for us yesterday.”

“How nice of you. Thanks, Clan.”

“It was nothing. Heh heh...”

The group was now getting to work aboard Clan’s Cradle. Her atelier there was the perfect place to put together RC cars. There was plenty of space—not to mention every tool they could possibly need.

“This is even more amazing than Yama-chan’s studio, ho!”

“There’s all kinds of stuff here, ho!”

“I shall enjoy this immensely! I have always been intrigued by that tool for painting various things!”

Clan had made preparations ahead of time so the group could begin painting

first thing. It would be done by spray, but with an airbrush rather than spray paint. Clan had chosen it because it would result in a nicer finish—and because she knew the haniwas and Alunaya would have fun with it.

“Please find the booth with your name on it to begin painting,” she instructed them.

“Mine’s here, here!”

“Thank you, Clan-chan, ho!”

“Let’s get right to it! Don your aprons!” she instructed further.

“Ho!”

“Ho-oh!”

While Alunaya and the haniwas were too excited to notice, Clan had arranged small airbrushes that would be easier for their tiny bodies to use. Thanks to that, they were able to enjoy painting without any obstacles. Even Koutarou could tell at a glance that setting all of this up had taken far more work than putting together any RC car.

“You can be a good girl when you want to.”

“I mean... I didn’t...”

“I hadn’t even considered they’d need special tools. Thanks for that.”

Koutarou was impressed that Clan had thought that far ahead, and he patted her on the head in a show of his appreciation.



“Veltlion... I didn’t really do anything different than usual...”

Clan felt what she’d done was only natural, yet the response she’d gotten was anything but. She was puzzled (though she was also incredibly pleased). She lightly touched her hand to her head as she walked off to her own painting booth.

Although it was everyone’s first time painting cars this way, they all managed to finish up within the hour. Different parts took different colors, so the system was easy enough to follow even for a total beginner. While the bodies cooked in the drying machine for the next three hours, they’d set about the rest of their work.

“All right! It’s finally time to move on to assembling the machinery,” Koutarou informed everyone.

“At long last!” cheered Alunaya.

“It’s my first time, ho, so I’m a little nervous!”

“They never show the full assembly in the show, ho!”

“I guess not, huh?” Koutarou hummed. “Hey, I know. Why don’t you give us a demonstration, Clan?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I believe in you.”

Clan’s heart skipped a beat. Koutarou was of course complimenting her technical skills, but she couldn’t help taking it to mean something else.

“Understood,” she replied. “Please come this way, everyone.”

“Ho!”

“Ho! Ho!”

“Let us see what you’ve got.”

“Clan’s a real master when it comes to tech.”

Since Alunaya and the haniwas were beginners, Clan would build her car first

as an example for them. The boys gathered around her worktable, their eyes fixed on her.

This is strange... Why am I getting so excited?

She was just putting together a basic machine, but her heart was racing—for more than one reason. She couldn't keep herself from grinning, even though it was inappropriate for the task at hand.

"First things first, make certain that you have all of the necessary parts. Most instructions will omit this step, but it's critical. Take stock of all your parts against the list included in the kit," she instructed.

"Commencing list scan, ho! Transferring data, ho!"

"Commencing image analysis, ho! Comparing the received data, ho! All parts are present and accounted for, ho!"

"That was convenient..."

"Behold the power of brothers, ho!"

"A combo attack, ho!"

"This is largely the same as building any plastic model. The kit comes with instructions, so you just have to follow what they say."

Clan started by picking up the chassis that would be the foundation of her car. Following the instructions step by step, she began assembling the various components. There was no hesitation in her movements, and even the way she turned the screws was graceful.

"Make sure to be especially careful when adding the steering and driving systems. Since they'll determine how your vehicle moves, you must ensure they're oriented correctly when attaching them to the chassis."

"Of course!" remarked Alunaya. "Because they could get flipped around in packaging or assembly, yes?"

"Precisely, Alunaya-dono. You would make a good engineer."

Clan continued to give pointers and instructions as she worked, and she answered everyone's questions as they came up. All the while, her expression

was brighter and her voice more cheerful than usual.

Was she always this cute...?

During her presentation, Koutarou found himself charmed at several points. Clan was radiant, cheerful, and innocent. It was a side of her he'd never seen before—or perhaps one he'd never tried to see.

“What’s the matter, Veltlion?” she asked.

“...I was just kinda taken by how cute you are.”

“Jeez, Veltlion! Take this seriously! You’re the one who asked for a demonstration!”

Clan assumed Koutarou was only joking, but in truth, he was baring his heart. He couldn’t help thinking that joining their small RC group was a sign she’d grown.

The haniwas and Alunaya were ready and raring to go after Clan’s demonstration, and they began assembling their own vehicles at a confident pace. That was, of course, in large part thanks to the appropriately sized tools Clan had prepared for them.

The following weekend, Koutarou and the others were set to have their first race. They’d used the intervening week to adjust and modify their machines. Thanks to that, their cars were now quite different from when they’d first been assembled.

“Isn’t this kinda unfair, you guys?” Koutarou muttered in exasperation as he beheld the other four racers lined up next to his jeep. They’d all undergone rather radical customizations. “Especially you, Clan.”

“This isn’t anything that major, is it?”

Clan’s modifications to her buggy seemed rather modest at first glance. She’d drilled holes in various places to make the machine lighter, purchased more powerful gears that were perfect circles, and replaced the grease on the moving parts with the best she could get from Forthorthe. However, one modification in particular stood out—a part shaped like a globe had been attached to the

driver's position.

"What's with that ball?!" Koutarou demanded.

"What's wrong with adding a camera? Don't be so stingy," Clan replied.

When they'd been putting their cars together, Koutarou and the boys had agreed to allow Clan a camera as a handicap. The sphere in her buggy's driver's seat was the result of that. It was a device of her own invention that could record in all directions. The footage was sent to a computer that projected it directly to Clan's eyes, meaning she could control her machine like she was driving it herself. On top of that, the footage was analyzed to keep her apprised of her rivals' locations. So with the simple addition of a camera, she'd effectively created a VR control system, complete with radar.

"You guys aren't much better!" Koutarou complained, turning to the haniwas.

"We haven't made any illegal modifications, ho!"

"We followed all of the rules, ho!"

"You're planning on riding your RC cars, aren't you?!"

"Nope, ho!"

"We'll be flying two millimeters above them, ho!"

The haniwas' choice modification wasn't a far cry from Clan's. They had added seats to the roofs of their RC cars—steering the vehicles from there would effectively be driving them. The additional elevation also gave them a better field of view. But since actually riding their cars would be against the rules, they would be flying two millimeters above the seats instead—a technical loophole that was just barely considered fair play.

"You've gone overboard too, Alunaya-dono!" Koutarou continued.

"Have you a complaint about my Prominence Kaiser?" Alunaya returned.

Alunaya's vehicle was the most striking of the lot. He'd assembled it with great care following Clan's example, and he'd painted the body a fiery red with a gold flake finish (with Shizuka's help). Living up to its name, Prominence Kaiser was a flashy RC car that looked like it had jumped straight out of the anime. The only real difference from the kit was that the local mascot character had been

removed from the driver's seat. In its place sat a centimeters-tall version of Alunaya himself. The mini Alunaya was a clone made from mana that shared its senses with the real Alunaya. In a sense, it was an even more advanced VR system than Clan's.

"It's not a complaint, exactly... Wahaha! You know what? Fine! If that's what you're all going to play, I have a trick or two up my sleeve too! I won't be holding back, so let me show you that the control scheme isn't the only thing to RC racing!"

There was a glint in Koutarou's eye now that he'd realized his rivals were serious about their upcoming race. He'd been planning to hold back during the first round—but not anymore. He was going to go all out and crush the competition. He was committed now, even if that meant showing no mercy.

Since they couldn't let anyone see the haniwas or Alunaya, the group had made a special reservation at the track outside of its normal hours. Fortunately, one of Kiriha's associates was the owner and she'd been willing to make the arrangements. So, as the organizer, Kiriha came to see the race the day of. And sitting next to her was the race's sponsor, Theia, who'd agreed to fund the event in the name of the Forthorthian royal family. It was thus dubbed the Theiamillis Cup, making the weekend's race the First Theiamillis Cup RC Grand Prix. The prize was ten servings of sukiyaki. All of the participating vehicles were off-road models, so they would be running the dirt course. The first to finish five laps would be declared the winner.

"Hahaha, the time has finally come! Flame on, Kaiser!" cried Alunaya.

Prominence Kaiser sitting at the starting line burst into ethereal crimson flames. They were just an illusion created by Alunaya's surplus mana, but it looked like something straight from the show.

"We won't lose either, ho! Falcon, Brave Wing!"

"Thunder Tornado, Full Burst! Ho!"

Not willing to be shown up, Karama bid his Mach Falcon deploy its wings. The lines along its body began to glow. Similarly, the rear cover of Korama's Thunder Tornado's opened up, exposing a crystal within that sparked with lightning. Both were illusions that they'd asked Maki to make.

“I had no idea these models were so accurate to the anime...”

“Clan, those are absolutely *not* normal RC cars!”

The buggy and jeep were the only two racers that didn’t join in the showing off—but that wasn’t representative of their drivers. Both Clan and Koutarou were also getting pumped.

“All right, everyone! Get ready!”

Standing at the starting line was an excited Sanae. Since she thought it would be fun, she’d volunteered to kick off the race. When she waved the flag, the competitors would take off—and that moment was swiftly approaching.

“Get set...”

All eyes fell on the checkered flag Sanae held high. As if she’d been waiting for exactly that, she swung it down with a bright smile.

“Gooooo!”

Compared to normal cars, their miniature RC counterparts hit their top speeds quickly. The high electric output of their batteries caused their motors to turn at high speeds, and all five racers sped off in a fierce skirmish to take the first corner.

“Damn it, my handicap got me!” Koutarou cursed.

He was a little behind the others because his jeep model was prone to doing wheelies when he gunned it. Because the first corner was so close to the starting line, he wouldn’t be able to steer through the turn with his front wheels in the air. He needed to accelerate slower to ensure he maintained control of his vehicle.

“Hahaha! I will not let anyone get ahead of me!” Alunaya roared.

The Fire Dragon Emperor was indeed out in front of the pack. With his animal reflexes, he’d taken off the instant Sanae had swung the flag. The haniwas and Clan were no match for him in that regard, so they were following close behind.

“These turns are nothing! Tallyho, Kaiser!”

Hailing from the rocky peaks of a volcanic mountain range, Alunaya was used

to flying through narrow spaces. The concept of steering was new to him, but his navigation of the environment was second to none. His red tractor quickly and smoothly cleared curve after curve.

“I knew that Uncle Dragon was no normal driver, ho!”

“Keep calm, ho! Let’s review the data from this first lap, ho! It looks like he loses speed on the turns, ho!”

“I see! Kaiser is big, so it swings outward on the curves, ho!”

“Ho! The turns are our chance, then! Our smaller cars should be able to overtake him from the inner track, ho!”

With this new plan, the haniwas began turning things around on the second lap. They used the data they’d collected during the first to strategically adjust their course. As a result, they were slowly gaining on Alunaya.

“You’d use my own skills against me?! I knew you Racing Brothers were not to be underestimated!” he cried.

The race was a competition of instinct and insight. The fight for first place was a nuanced battle of capitalizing on your opponents’ strengths and weaknesses. The battle unfolding at the rear of the pack, however, was a little different...

“You sure made something crazy,” Koutarou gibed.

Clan’s buggy was practically gliding along the dirt track. Despite the many bumps in the road, her car drove along on an even keel—proof that she’d been picky down to the oil dampeners. In comparison, Koutarou’s jeep was bouncing up and down.

“I can’t win by technique, so this is the least I had to do to compete,” Clan replied.

Naturally, she’d been particular about more than just her oil dampeners, but she was still just a normal girl. Clan was fond of unmanned vehicles yet couldn’t measure up to Koutarou in terms of handling—even with her VR control system. With each lap, he gradually closed in on her until finally...

“Whoa!”

While Clan was distracted talking to Koutarou, she accidentally swung wide

on a turn. Koutarou smoothly pulled up behind her, closing the gap between them in the third lap.

“I finally caught you, Clan!”

“I won’t let you get ahead of me!”

Now that they were bumper to bumper, Clan and Koutarou both changed their strategies. He tried to take any opening he could to pull ahead, while she did everything she could to block him. Trying to anticipate one another’s moves, their machines swerved back and forth. At first, Koutarou had assumed he’d easily be able to pass Clan as long as he caught up to her. But as things played out, that wasn’t the case.

“Why can’t I pass you?!”

“I know you better than anyone. Naturally, I ran simulations ahead of time.”

“Who would go that far?!”

Clan truly did know Koutarou better than anyone. She had a wealth of his combat data, and she’d accordingly created an AI based on him to train with before the race.

Damn, we’re already in the fourth lap! I won’t be able to catch up to the front at this rate! I guess I have no other choice!

Based on their machines and Clan’s countermeasures to keep him in check, Koutarou quickly determined that it would be impossible to get ahead of her using normal means. He thus decided to do whatever it would take.

“Say, Clan...”

“I’m busy, so keep it brief!”

“I heard you put on some weight recently.”

“Who spread such slander—” WHAM! “Oh nooo!”

“Wahaha, see you later!”

Shaken by Koutarou’s words, Clan ran off course and crashed into a wall. That was exactly what Koutarou needed to leave her in the dust. It had to be said that he knew Clan like the back of his hand too.

“Ah, Veltlion! You cheater!” Clan shouted.

“You can do it, Glasses! Get Koutarou!” Sanae cheered.

“I intend to do precisely that!”

Sanae returned Clan’s buggy to the course using her psychic powers. Its VR system had been destroyed in the crash, however, so Clan removed it before speeding off after Koutarou.

Now I’m mad! Just who do you think I’m watching my weight for in the first place?!

It was harder to pilot the buggy without the VR controls, but the machine was also lighter without them. It was too soon to give up, and there was a fire burning in Clan’s eyes.

By the middle of the fourth lap, the haniwas had caught up to Alunaya’s Prominence Kaiser. The data they’d accumulated throughout the race gave them a big advantage—but they were still stuck behind the flashy red tractor. The reason? They were driving using the collected data as reference.

“Hahaha, I doubt even you two have data on competing against *me*! This is as far as you go, Racing Brothers!” Alunaya boasted as his miniature illusion bared its fangs in the driver’s seat.

On a course without any variables, the haniwas could perfect their driving just by analyzing the track. In a showdown with Alunaya, however, they had to maneuver in response to the way he moved. He prevented them from relying entirely on their data and projections. If the race went on long enough, they would be able to gather enough data on him to account for that too—but this five-lap race would be over long before then.

“We aren’t finished yet, ho! We still have Ane-san’s secret plan, ho!”

“Right-ho! Let’s do it! Ho!”

“Do your worst, Racing Brothers Hani and Ho!”

“Here we go-ho!”

“Prepare yourself, ho!”

“Special Technique: Two Hearts as One!” the haniwas shouted in unison.

Unable to overtake Alunaya, the haniwas resorted to their trump card: using their synchronization mode to drive their cars together. This way, they could perfectly share their senses, information, and more. They were truly as one and worked in tandem to get ahead of Alunaya.

“They changed the way they’re driving?!” The Fire Dragon Emperor was taken aback. “What is this coordinated movement?!”

“This is the power of our bonds, ho!”

“We are of one mind, ho!”

“I see how it is!”

Now that he knew what he was up against, Alunaya immediately began devising a countermeasure. Both haniwas appeared to make a move at the same time—but one of them was really only a decoy to give the other an advantage. With their perfect coordination, their attack patterns were complex and hard to predict. Just keeping abreast of them was the best Alunaya could do.

“Argh, I can’t keep this up forever!” he roared. “I’ll have to fight back!”

The race was in its fifth and final lap, but Alunaya sensed that he’d be overtaken before long, so he decided to take a gamble. He was going to tackle Karama’s Mach Falcon. He would take some damage in the process, but if he was lucky, he’d knock one of his opponents out of the race. Prepared for the risk, Alunaya steered to run Karama off the course.

“Ho?!”

“Karama!”

“How do you like that, haniwas?!”

“Ho, ho! Ho, oh, ho!”

“Hang in there, ho! If you can shake him off, we can win this, ho!”

Alunaya had rammed Karama during a corner, using the centrifugal force of the turn plus Prominence Kaiser’s own weight to push with all his might. It was

simply too much for the haniwa's tiny car to handle.

"Hooooo nooooo!"

"Brother!"

Unable to bear it, Karama's Mach Falcon was thrown from the track.

"Leave the rest to me, ho!"

Fortunately, Mach Falcon wasn't damaged. But unfortunately, it would be impossible for Karama to catch back up with less than half a lap to go. This would be the end of the race for him.

"I will avenge you, ho!"

Still, not all hope was lost for the haniwas. While Alunaya was so focused on Karama, Korama had pulled ahead.

"But with only one of you, your power has been halved!" Alunaya taunted. "Is your Thunder Tornado alone enough to stop my Kaiser?!"

"Bring it, ho! I will—"

Just as a fierce clash was beginning anew between them, a jeep and buggy flew past them. During their three-way fight, Koutarou and Clan had caught up to the front of the pack.

"Big Brother?!"

"Oh nooo!"

At the worst possible time, Korama and Alunaya had both been overtaken. They sped after Koutarou and Clan, but there was no chance of catching up now that they were approaching the final turn and the home stretch.

I won't be able to take the inside!

Koutarou's inability to take a corner at full speed was a big handicap. He wanted to stay on the inside to keep Clan from getting ahead, but he didn't think he could do it. However...

"Ha! I got it!"

Perhaps due to a miscalculation, Clan ended up swinging wide again and

taking the outside. With the path ahead wide open now, Koutarou was confident he could hug the turn and take the lead. At least, he was until he felt something soft press against his cheek.

“Huh?”

Distracted at a critical moment, Koutarou botched the turn and flipped his jeep. When he did, Clan’s buggy rounded the corner with ease and shot toward the finish line. Korama and Alunaya followed after her but were unable to catch up.

“Goaaaaal! Glasses wins!”

In the end, Clan stole the victory. Alunaya took second and Korama third. Koutarou and Karama both retired after their crashes.

“Ohohohoho, I win!”

“You just...”

“I only used the same trick you did. Do you have something to say about that?”

“No, not really... That’s not really what I meant...”

Koutarou gave Clan a bewildered look. In contrast, Clan was wearing an emotional smile. He found it so endearing that he couldn’t bring himself to complain.

Though Clan was declared the victor, there were several people who didn’t want that to be the end of things—namely the losers and the three spectators.

“I came in *second*? Me?! The emperor that rules over creation?! I will not accept this, Blue Knight! I demand a rematch!”

“Our plan was perfect, ho! We just need to improve our individual abilities, ho!”

“There’s only one way to do that, ho! We must train, ho! Also, let’s ask Ane-san for a new strategy, ho!”

Alunaya and the haniwas weren’t satisfied with their defeat. They wanted to

hone their skills and try again with another race.

“What a truly amusing sport! Let me join next time too! In fact, I won’t forgive you if you don’t!” demanded Theia.

“I wanna race too!” chimed in Sanae. “I’m gonna make a cute car!”

“Karama, Korama,” called Kiriha. “How about the three of us make a team?”

Theia’s sense of competition had flared up watching the race. Sanae just wanted to have fun. And Kiriha would join in to stir things up even more. Though their reasons differed, they were all equally motivated.

“That sounds good, ho!”

“Ane-san’s got the right idea!”

“In that case, I shall bring Shizuka next time!”

“Hey, you guys are being unfair again!”

“Veltlion, *you* of all people are going to say that...?”

This bitter defeat was only the beginning of their countless fierce battles with their friends and rivals to follow. For Racing Brothers Hani & Ho and the fastest Elder Dragon Driver Alunaya, the race was just getting started.

Episode 2: A Normal Day for Maki and Crimson

Rainbow Heart stoutly believed in strict adherence to the rules and all that was right, so upon the group's return from Forthorthe, the magical organization insisted that they all pass an academic achievement exam to prove they were qualified to move up a grade at Harukaze High. The looming test was a waking nightmare for Yurika and Sanae—but the situation was a little different for the former evil magical girl Maki, who also stoutly believed in abiding by the rules. She knew she could succeed as long as she reviewed the appropriate material ahead of time. She even thought she stood a chance of passing without reviewing at all, but a strict, earnest girl like Maki wasn't the type to cut corners. Thus she was in the library to study again today.

"I should really learn more history..."

Today, she was going over Japanese history. Her table was lined with books and notes on the subject. The test would only cover what was in her textbooks, but she was additionally consulting reference books on the parts that were difficult to learn. Koutarou, who was carrying several books himself, was impressed when he saw her setup.

"I see you're hard at work, Aika-san," he remarked.

"Well, I wasn't born in Japan, so this is one of my worst subjects," Maki whispered so that only Koutarou could hear. Since she was from Folsaria, the subject was naturally foreign to her. Her grades in and knowledge of local history were average at best, and she saw that as a weakness to overcome.

"You're both magical girls, but you're completely different... Hmm..."

Taking a seat next to Maki, Koutarou cracked open a book for himself. He'd come to the library with her, but rather than studying for himself, he had someone else in mind. His goal was to find study materials for Yurika and Sanae.

"Yurika only ever tries to overlook her own faults. I wish she'd take a hint or two from you," he grumbled as he flipped through *Learn with Manga: Japanese*

History. He'd picked it up with the two slackers of room 106 in mind, knowing they would get bored with books that were nothing but text.

"Personally, I'm envious of Yurika," Maki replied.

"You really shouldn't be," Koutarou assured her.

"But you're always thinking about her."

"Not in a good way..."

"Even so."

Maki was beginning to feel like her stubborn commitment to rules and norms was a fault. It made her less memorable. Meanwhile, Yurika and Sanae—for all their faults—constantly occupied Koutarou's mind. In fact, he was thinking of them even now.

Hearing Maki's perspective on this, Koutarou stopped to think. He then glanced over at her before slowly reaching over to Maki's right hand beneath the table. Maki was surprised at first, but she quickly took his hand in return.

"Satomi-kun, it's hard to study like this..."

"You're free to let go."

"Absolutely not," Maki replied, sticking out her tongue.

Their fingers intertwined as the smile on her face grew brighter. With only one hand available each, their study efficiency dropped like a rock. Even so, Maki was in a great mood, but it didn't last for long...



“Wow, Maki, you should take a look at your mug in a mirror.”

“C-Crimson?!”

Unfortunately, the instant Maki spotted an old friend at the opposite corner of the table, she let go of Koutarou’s hand in a panic. She had no intention of denying her feelings for him, but she considered those incredibly private. She would much rather keep them to herself.

“It’s been some time,” Maki said, trying to pull herself together. “Since Forthorthe, I believe.”

“Too late to play it cool now.”

“Ugh...”

Crimson stared at Maki in amusement. The former Dark Navy was blushing and squirming. It was clear how rattled she was. Her earnest nature was betraying her.

What should I do...?

Koutarou wasn’t caught off guard the same way Maki was, but he didn’t want to say anything that might make the situation worse for her. He decided simply to keep his mouth shut for the time being.

“S-So, what are you doing here?” Maki asked falteringly. She was indeed curious as to why Crimson was in the school library, but her true aim was to change the subject.

“I thought it’d be fun to come see what you were up to,” Crimson replied.

“E-Excuse me?!”

“I’m joking. Calm down.” Crimson soothed Maki with a sly smile. She had little interest in romance to begin with, so she was only teasing Maki. Satisfied for now, she then replied honestly, “I actually got some unexpected time off, so I wanted to pay you a visit.”

“You got time off? Why are you even on Earth?”

Crimson and the rest of Darkness Rainbow were making use of their special talents as mediators between Folsaria and the galactic empire nowadays. They

should have had their hands full with their new job back in Forthorthe.

“Well,” Crimson began as she leaned over the table, “Purple has business here, and Green is acting as her assistant.”

“Is it for some kind of negotiation?” Maki asked.

“You nailed it. They’re delivering a message from Forthorthe to Rainbow Heart with Nana.”

“I see. So you’ve already hit a snag coordinating the immigration.”

“Nailed it again. I see you’ve still got your head on straight, even in love.”

“Please, spare me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Hahaha.”

Forthorthe was planning to take in both the Folsarians and the People of the Earth, and the first step in arranging the move was establishing contact between the nations. Select members of Darkness Rainbow had thus returned to Earth alongside Theia and Clan as emissaries. Once on the planet, Nana and Purple had continued on to Folsaria. They’d taken Green with them for her intelligence and information processing skills.

“So what’s your role in the operation?” Maki asked.

“I’m the bodyguard,” Crimson replied.

“What are you doing here, then?”

“Don’t sweat it. There’s nothing to worry about now that Purple and Green are in Folsaria.” Crimson’s job was to escort Nana and the others, but after safely delivering them to Rainbow Heart, she was left with nothing to do until Folsaria decided what their next move would be. “So I found myself thinking of you.”

“And that’s why you came to see me? But still, now that I look at you, I have to say I’m surprised to see you in that outfit, Crimson.” Now that Maki had calmed down, she finally took notice of what her friend was wearing—the Kisshouharukaze High School uniform.

“You’re going to say that it doesn’t suit me, aren’t you?” Crimson asked. “Go

ahead and laugh.”

“Ahahahaha!”

“Stop that!”

“Heh, I’m sorry. You were trying not to cause a scene, weren’t you?”

“Yet you’re still laughing... That’s not very nice, you know?” Crimson complained.

“That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to be lately,” Maki replied.

“You’re into something weird again, huh?”

Crimson was thoughtless in a different sense than Yurika or Sanae, but even she understood that showing up to Harukaze High in her usual outfit would have caused trouble. She’d accordingly changed clothes in order to blend in. So even though Maki felt the school uniform didn’t suit her, she didn’t say anything more on the matter.

“I’m sorry to say,” she began instead, “that I don’t have the same kind of free time, Crimson.”

“Oh? You got plans to do a little this and that with this man?”

“No! I have a test coming up!”

Koutarou watched their conversation unfold with great interest. He was seeing sides of Maki that she never revealed under ordinary circumstances. He could only assume it was because Crimson was an old friend. After mulling over their relationship for some time, Koutarou stood up from the table.

“All right,” he said. “I’m going to go look for more study materials.”

“Oh, sure thing, Satomi-kun.”

Koutarou had figured the girls would have an easier time talking without him present. They were close friends who hadn’t really seen each other since being forced to fight one another, after all. They undoubtedly had plenty to sort out between them, so Koutarou wanted to leave them to it. Fortunately, he had the perfect excuse. Finding more study aides for Yurika and Sanae would be a far better use of his time than getting in Maki and Crimson’s way. The two girls

watched him disappear between the rows of bookcases. Now that he was gone, the subject of their conversation naturally shifted.

“You know... I really am surprised to see you two getting along so well,” Crimson remarked.

“This again? Please drop it already,” Maki begged as her cheeks flushed. She felt truly awkward discussing the matter, so she wanted to drop it as soon as possible.

“I’m not trying to make fun of you or anything. That’s honestly how I feel.”

“Crimson...” Maki couldn’t deny her friend. She looked so sincere that Maki felt compelled to reconsider and hear her out.

“I could hardly believe your face, Maki.”

“Was it that bad?”

At that, Maki realized that Crimson had only teased her before because Koutarou was present. She couldn’t help smiling a little at the thought. When she grinned, Crimson did too.

“I’ve never seen you look so innocent and open.”

The Maki that Crimson knew was always angry. She hated the world, which never played by the rules. It left her with quite a chip on her shoulder. Yet in spite of her aggression, Maki had a true and honest heart. That was why Crimson had taken a liking to her. She was easy to understand.

But Crimson had gotten an entirely different impression of her best friend upon entering the library. When she was sitting with Koutarou, Maki looked as though she’d forgiven the cruelty of the world.

“I get it now. You always wanted to be able to smile like that... I don’t think it’s something I’ll ever be able to do,” Crimson continued with a furrowed brow and bitter smile.

In the past, Maki had honored Crimson’s wish and agreed to fight her seriously. Looking back on it now, Crimson had to wonder if it had truly been worth it... and she found herself thinking the answer was no. She was a terrible friend, and that was all she would ever be.

“You think so?” asked Maki. “You helped save Green, so I don’t think it’s that far out of reach.”

Maki had a very different take on the matter. Not only had Crimson saved Green, she’d also come to see Maki at school of her own volition. Crimson had changed. The entirety of Darkness Rainbow had. They were all different girls now.

“Forget about that,” Crimson argued. “I dunno what I was thinking.”

Darkness Rainbow was originally an evil organization of magical girls hellbent on selfishly achieving their own goals, yet they’d all come together when it was time to save one of their own. That should have been unthinkable. The very thought made her bashful.

“I have good news for you, Crimson.”

“What?”

The tables had turned. Crimson was now blushing and Maki had a twinkle in her eye. The former Dark Navy rested her chin in her hands and continued in a teasing tone, “When I first met Satomi-kun, I thought I’d lost my mind too. I told myself that everything would go back to normal... even though I was vaguely aware that I was just deceiving myself.”

In the past, Maki had convinced herself that her infatuation with Koutarou was nothing more than a delusion. That her eagerness to see him was just eagerness to complete her mission. She felt that Crimson was behaving much like she had back then—pretending that her budding feelings weren’t real. In Maki’s eyes, Crimson was walking a path that she had already tread toward happiness.

“You’re dead wrong, Maki. It’s just... What’d you call it?”

“A strategic necessity?”

“Right, that’s it.”

“Heh, then I won’t say anything more for now.”

Maki knew it was a long journey. Even with Signaltin’s help, it had taken her several months. And without that boon, it would take her former allies even

longer. Rather than poking and prodding in a way that might spur her friend in the wrong direction, however, Maki simply decided to steer the conversation elsewhere. They talked about this and that afterward—recent goings-on, how Forthorthians were taskmasters, how obstinate Folsarians were, and so on. Aside from the otherworldly specifics of their conversation, they sounded just like two old friends catching up.

“You could just use magic to make the test a breeze,” Crimson said. “Like to read other people’s minds or enhance your memory.”

“I despise cheating.”

“Yeah, you’ve always been stubborn and set in your ways.”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone so obsessed with fighting.”

Maki and Crimson had both been evil magical girls who thrived in the shadows of society—yet here they were, casually chatting in the sunny library. Fate was full of strange twists and turns.

“Rude! It’s not like I pick fights every chance I get.”

“You don’t?!”

“Y’know, Maki, your personality’s really changed since you switched sides.”

“Heh, maybe so. But now that you mention it, it’s true that you didn’t pick a fight with us.”

After going all out against one another, Maki and Crimson had parted ways with an agreement not to hold back the next time they crossed paths. With the unexpected developments to follow, however, they’d never had their rematch. Like Crimson said, she didn’t *always* pick a fight.

“It’s a good thing we didn’t tangle with you guys. I think, anyway,” she confessed.

“Really?” Maki asked. “Have you truly changed your ways?”

“Shut up. I’m still ready to throw down.”

“So you escorted Purple and Green all this way in hopes of venting some frustration, but alas, no enemies appeared to fight you?”

“Yeah, it was a total snoozefest.”

“And so you came to see me because you’re bored.”

“Nailed it. So, Maki, wanna try to assassinate me?”

Crimson was indeed grateful she hadn’t had to fight Maki and the others in their most recent encounter, even though she still thirsted for a good fight. Crimson was simple in that way. It was perhaps what had saved her friendship with Maki in spite of their previous skirmish with one another. It was a virtue of sorts—although she *was* belligerent by nature. Even now, her unfulfilled bloodlust was smoldering inside her. That was why she’d invited Maki to attack her.

“No, thank you. What’s even in that for me?”

Of course, Maki immediately refused the violent offer. She had no desire to fight her best friend, the most dangerous combatant in all of Darkness Rainbow. She hadn’t wanted to fight her even back when Crimson had asked the first time years ago.

“I’m sure you can come up with something,” Crimson continued, cajoling her friend.

“You’re as eccentric as ever...” Maki sighed.

“It cost me a good friend.”

“Don’t worry. I’m still your friend.”

When Maki and Crimson had last crossed staffs, they’d done so with the understanding that it would be the end of their relationship. But things don’t always go as planned. Thanks to the strange workings of fate, the two girls were as close now as they ever had been. This thrilled Maki, and she was sure Crimson felt the same way.

For a while, Koutarou walked back and forth browsing the shelves. He was planning on returning to Maki with the material he’d found, but as soon as he stepped out from the bookcases, he stopped in his tracks.

“It cost me a good friend.”

“Don’t worry. I’m still your friend.”

Maki and Crimson were still happily chatting away. They were using their library voices and Koutarou couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he could tell based on the looks on their faces. He thus decided to head for another table to pore over the books he’d gathered.

“Hmm?”

Koutarou kept quiet so as not to disturb the girls, but he couldn’t escape Crimson’s sharp senses. She’d noticed him, and so had Maki. The two girls silently watched him walk off again. Once he was out of sight, Crimson called out to Maki with a smile.

“So he’s not just a great warrior, eh, Maki? Did you fall for that hidden delicate side of his?”

“I suppose so. He also knows the real me.”

“Mm, I see...”

Crimson had been trying to tease her, but Maki answered earnestly. Koutarou was the most important thing in the world to her, so she was more proud than embarrassed of their relationship. And when the talk of love turned serious, Crimson’s plan backfired and made her bashful instead.

“By the way, I’d be curious to know what *your* ideal man is like, Crimson.”

Thankfully, the topic turned to her. Talking about her own love life wasn’t easy, but it was leagues better than listening to Maki gush about hers.

“He has to be the strongest,” she answered honestly.

“And then you want to beat him?” Maki asked.

“Yup.”

“But wouldn’t that be bad?”

“If I can beat him, it just means he wasn’t the strongest after all. And if I can’t beat him, then I’ll bear his child then raise them to be stronger than their father.”

Crimson’s answer was a little too off-the-wall. Even when it came to choosing

her partner, power meant everything to Crimson. While that was simple and easy to understand, Maki wasn't really sure how to respond.

"I'm not sure I see where the love is in that..."

"I don't really understand love."

Crimson had no experience with romance. She lived entirely for battle. Rather than men, she pursued strength and strength alone. Her lust for it had twisted even her views on relationships.

"You really are helpless... Oh, I know. Should I ask Satomi-kun to fight you if he's not busy?"

"Please do! I love you, Maki!"

"I thought you didn't understand love..."

Even if Crimson didn't know love, Maki at least wanted to help relieve her boredom. She loved Crimson back in her own way, after all.

Since Maki rarely asked for anything, Koutarou decided that he would agree to whatever she wanted before she even said it. As long as no one's life was on the line, he enjoyed a good fight himself, so even hearing the details of her request didn't change his mind. He was actually quite excited by the prospect, so Maki quickly arranged a sparring match for him and Crimson.

"Sanctuary! Modifier: Effective Area, Colossal!" Maki incanted, holding her staff up as it began emitting a yellow light.

The magical glow was a barrier that would keep people away as well as prevent sound, light, and radio waves from escaping the area. The group likely wouldn't encounter any unexpected visitors in the mountain clearing where they'd set up, but Maki wanted to be certain. With her magic, they'd have no reason to worry now.

"So, what are the rules?" Koutarou asked, a little excited. He welcomed any opponent he could go all out against—and getting to face one he bore no enmity for was especially rare.

"Anything goes as long as nobody dies," Crimson replied eagerly.

She was even more amped for the fight than Koutarou. Her eyes were aglitter with anticipation. Seeing her like this reminded him of Theia, despite their difference in height.

“Hmm? Is something wrong?” Crimson noticed the smile on his face and cocked her head.

Koutarou nearly told her the truth but ultimately reconsidered. Just like Theia, Crimson probably didn’t want to be compared to anyone else. “I was just thinking that you must really like fighting,” he said.

“That’s right. Strength is everything.”

Even Crimson’s motto sounded like something Theia would say. Because of that, Koutarou began to suspect that some other motivation was driving her beyond a raw hunger for power. She’d come all this way specifically to see Maki, after all.

“I have to say,” Koutarou began, “I probably won’t live up to your expectations if those are the rules.”

“Huh, why?!”

“You should know that I’m not very powerful on my own. Aika-san’s stronger than me.”

In a no-holds-barred fight against a serious combatant, Koutarou would be lucky to hold his ground. He had considerable skill with a blade, but overall, that was it. Without Saguratin, Signaltin, and Sanae’s psychic powers, he knew he was nothing—especially compared to the invaders. The only one he might stand a chance against was Kiriha.

“Don’t say something so pathetic,” Crimson rebuked.

“I’m pretty honest about my limits,” Koutarou said in turn.

“Reminds me of someone. Heh, I guess you found a man who’s a lot like you, Maki,” Crimson teased.

“Except Satomi-kun is a liar,” replied Maki.

“I bet they’re all necessary lies in your book.”

“...Maybe. The rest is just him hiding his embarrassment.”

“Jeez, can you please not gush about your love life with such a serious face?”

“Heh heh, sorry.”

“So, what do you want to do?” Koutarou cut in.

“Well, it wouldn’t be much of a contest if you brought out that rainbow sword...”

Crimson stopped to think. Koutarou wanted to go all out without relying on anyone else’s power. As far as Crimson was concerned, that wouldn’t be much fun. The fight would be over too fast. But on the other hand, if Koutarou pulled out all the stops, the fight would be over just as quickly. There had to be a balance.

“How about this, Crimson? Satomi-kun will only use his golden sword, Saguratin, and I’ll support him with magic,” Maki offered as a compromise. Her idea was to cast spells that would assist Koutarou in combat without attacking herself.

“That’s perfect! Just what I’d expect from you, Maki! Keep slinging spells to keep him on my level!” There was a glint in Crimson’s eye as she praised Maki. Sensing a good fight ahead of her, she was starting to get excited again.

“Yes, yes. I know,” Maki replied with a happy smile.

Seeing the two girls like this, Koutarou was glad they’d been able to stay friends.

Koutarou leveled the tip of his sword at Crimson. Right now, Saguratin was under Maki’s control via her crest. It wouldn’t injure Crimson much the same way Signaltin had refused to harm Koutarou when in Maxfern’s hands. That meant Koutarou could go all out in this duel, for wielding Saguratin against Crimson was no different from wielding a toy sword.

“I see you’re all fired up, Satomi Koutarou,” she remarked.

“I don’t hate this sort of thing,” he replied. “I see you’re raring to go too.”

“Things have been so peaceful lately that I’m just *dying* of boredom.”

Crimson pointed her staff at Koutarou in turn. She liked wielding it as an axe in close-quarters combat and relying on it as a magical tool to sling spells from a distance. In short, she enjoyed a flashy fight. This, too, reminded Koutarou of Theia. Crimson normally relied on powerful spells meant to finish her opponents in a single strike, but for today, she would be limiting her arsenal so as not to injure Koutarou. She wouldn't use anything powerful enough to break through the defensive barrier Maki had cast.

"All right," said Crimson. "If you land a clean hit on me with your sword, I lose."

"And what about you?" Koutarou asked.

"Same rule applies. Any clean hit means I win."

"Simple enough."

Their match would end with the first direct hit. Grazing and glancing blows wouldn't count. It would have to be a hit good enough to end a real fight.

"Double Cast: Haste, Lightning Reflexes," Maki incanted.

"Oh?" Crimson remarked. "Going for a speedy match?"

"Yes. Your Inferno Fire has too big of an effective area."

"Well, I won't lose... Double Cast: Haste, Lightning Reflexes!"

Orange light wrapped around both Koutarou and Crimson. This set of enhancement spells would increase their movement speeds and reaction times considerably. A full-throttle bout between them like this would almost be like watching two wild beasts fight.

"Let's get started," Koutarou announced.

"You could have just attacked without waiting for me to finish my spell," Crimson reminded him.

"I'm like a surfer who waits for the wave to reach its peak," he replied.

"What a coincidence. So am I."

In truth, the battle had already begun. As the two combatants exchanged some light banter, they watched each other carefully. The first to let their guard

down would be at a huge disadvantage.

“Yikes... I should have just attacked instead of acting cool,” Koutarou lamented.

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. With his spirit sight, he could tell that there were no gaps in Crimson’s defenses. The recklessness she’d demonstrated before was nowhere to be seen. She was clearly different now. Koutarou’s intuition told her that she’d grown much stronger since their last fight. And knowing that, he couldn’t carelessly close the distance between them.

“Waiting for me to make the first move? How naive,” Crimson taunted, but she was also struggling to take the initiative. She sensed Koutarou had grown stronger as well.

As expected of somebody who has defeated several powerful foes. He’s acting like he’s having a hard time attacking, yet he’s not showing any sign of panic. Yeah, he’s definitely got the guts of a master swordsman...

Koutarou was young and still had room for improvement, but through his many battles, he’d gained a wealth of experience. That firsthand skill and knowledge made him a force to be reckoned with, and Crimson struggled to get the better of him because of it.

It looked like their battle would turn into a stalemate—but Maki wasn’t about to let that happen.

“Say, Satomi-kun...” she began.

With her speed and reflexes enhanced just like Koutarou’s, Crimson effectively had the upper hand given the range of her spells. Maki’s plan was to level the playing field a little.

“If I can help you win, will you give me a kiss as a reward?” she called loudly.

“A k-kiss?!” Crimson stammered.

“Aika-san, what are you—” Koutarou shouted.

Maki’s request had elicited quite a reaction from both fighters—presenting Koutarou with just the opportunity he needed.

“Ah, so *that’s* what you were doing!” he muttered to himself when he realized what was going on. The invaders’ daily mischief-making had taught him to think on his feet.

“Damn!”

Crimson, on the other hand, was slower to collect herself. She wasn’t used to having friends, much less being teased. Maki had thrown her for a real loop, which Maki had anticipated and used to Koutarou’s advantage.

“Let’s do this, Crimson!” he rallied.

“I’ll remember this, Maki!” Crimson roared.

“Oh, how scary.”

Koutarou and Crimson both made their moves, but because she had been slower to react, Crimson didn’t have the time for a long incantation. Instead, she gripped her staff-axe in both hands and charged at Koutarou. Now that she’d lost her chance to open with powerful magic, she was being forced into close combat.

“You really have a rotten personality, Maki!” she shouted.

Sparks flew when Koutarou’s sword met Crimson’s axe. Neither weapon damaged the other, but that wasn’t the end of their respective attacks. Both weapons were imbued with magic, so the real clash unfolded after they made contact.

“Whoa!”

The result? Koutarou was knocked back. Crimson had channeled a spell that used wind pressure to blow her opponent away. It was a basic and rather weak spell, but it was quick and easy to cast. Thanks to that, she’d managed to finish it in time and successfully knocked Koutarou off balance.

“Whatever are you talking about?” Maki called back in response to her friend’s taunt.

“Like how you’re keeping me from seeing my target!” Crimson replied.

The feisty magical girl brought her axe down on Koutarou, yet the powerful swing caught nothing but air. That was thanks to a spell cast on Koutarou’s

sword—a simple illusion to deceive his opponent and temporarily rob them of their sight.

“If I don’t do this, Satomi-kun might lose,” Maki explained.

When Crimson recovered, she saw three Koutarous standing beside one another. Two of them were illusions Maki had conjured while Crimson was blinded.

So this is why she messed with my vision!

“What happened to your memory-wiping trick?” Crimson clicked her tongue in her mind as she began casting the quickest attack spell in her repertoire.

“I can still do that, but it would make things harder for Satomi-kun.”

“I see you’re surprisingly devoted!”

Simple spells that a caster knew well didn’t require an incantation to invoke. When Crimson swung her arm, three crescent-shaped flames flew toward the three Koutarous.

“I’m pretty surprised myself. Besides... I don’t really want to mess with your memories.”

The crescent flames were rather weak and would only singe their targets at best. In fact, they did nothing at all to the real Koutarou—but they were enough to dispel the illusionary two.

“Stop being so naive and come at me for real!” Crimson bellowed.

“Don’t be so hasty,” Maki scolded her.

A flash of a sword. The whistle of an axe. Koutarou and Crimson were the ones locked in combat, yet the two magical girls were the ones carrying on a conversation in the process. Koutarou couldn’t help noticing this curious dynamic.

Their situation never allowed it before, but they really are good friends...

Nevertheless, he was fine with it. He just thought of it as Crimson and Maki playing in their own way. It was far preferable to them fighting seriously.

“All right, time to get serious!” Crimson roared.

“I thought you were already serious,” Maki replied.

“It’s a matter of mindset. Don’t be so nitpicky.”

“Then I’ll get serious too.”

“That’s the spirit!”

The girls really did seem to be enjoying themselves. Koutarou thus decided he’d avoid making any missteps in the future that might jeopardize that happiness.

The battle approached its end a few short minutes later. Fighters can only go all out for so long. Even enhanced with magic, humans have their limits—and Crimson reached hers first.

“I-Inferno Fiiireeeee!”

“Whoa there! You could really hurt someone with that!”

The flames licked Koutarou’s bangs. He thought he was done for, but the slight delay in Crimson’s timing saved him. She was actively fighting while casting spells, which was far more taxing than simply keeping up a sword fight like Koutarou was. She was already gasping for breath.

“Satomi-kun, fifteen seconds of shadowboxing please,” Maki instructed.

“You’re so kind, Aika-san...” Koutarou did as asked and began taking practice swings with his sword.

Maki’s intentions were clear. She wanted to give Crimson some time to recover and use up a bit of Koutarou’s stamina. The fight was effectively two against one, after all, and Maki wanted to make sure things were fair. A little handicap was accordingly in order.

“I hate that earnest-to-a-fault side of yours!” Crimson shouted.

“You came all this way, so why not enjoy ourselves a little longer?” Maki replied.

“But you won’t hold back, will you?”

“Of course not,” Maki said with a bright smile. She found it strange that

Crimson wasn't using the opportunity to attack Koutarou. In truth, Crimson had no room to criticize anyone for being earnest.

As the smile faded from Maki's face, Koutarou finished swinging his sword.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said, his breath ragged.

Koutarou was running out of steam and Crimson had calmed down. Just as Maki had intended, they were evenly matched now.

"Let's settle this, Maki," said Crimson.

"Agreed," said Maki. "Satomi-kun, please give it your all."

"I have been from the start."

"Then surpass your limits, Satomi Koutarou!"

"My *opponent* isn't supposed to tell me that..."

Koutarou turned Saguratin on Crimson again. Once more, magical light wreathed both fighters. They were preparing for their final clash.

"Crimson, you prefer to fight head-on, right?"

"It's the most fun."

"I feel the same way."

When their enhancement spells took effect, both fighters stepped forward. Since they weren't waiting for the fight to start this time, Crimson could have attacked Koutarou straight away with magic—but she chose close combat with her axe instead. She'd used all of her mana to enhance herself one final time. Her dream was to go toe to toe with the strongest foe imaginable, after all. As she charged, there was a smile on her face.

Too bad she's a girl! We could have had even more fun if she was a guy!

Koutarou flashed a grin too, much like the one he wore when catching beetles with Kenji. In fact, he found himself wondering if Crimson might like to go catch beetles too. He was also savoring the idea of a pure test of strength, so he refrained from petty tricks like pelting her with spiritual energy bullets. He, too, was saving everything for their final clash.

"Raaaaah!"

“Hyaaaaah!”

When axe and sword collided, rather than a metallic clink, there was an explosive sound. The attack spells in the weapons had canceled each other out. Covered in soot from the ensuing blast, Crimson and Koutarou continued to attack one another. Without using their weapons this time, they each swung a leg up into a kick. Their attacks canceled each other out again, and they both used the recoil to gain some distance and prepare themselves for the next attack. And yet again, the advantage Koutarou and Maki had as a team came into play.

“Aika-san—” he called.

“Quick Cast Force Field!” she incanted before he could finish.

“Yes! Thank you!”

Koutarou kicked off a yellow disk of light that appeared in front of him and jumped up high. The timing was perfect, and it allowed him to close in on Crimson in the blink of an eye. Coming down on her in a spin, he took a swing.

For some reason, Crimson just stood there for a split second, defenseless against the incoming attack. It was uncertain, however, if there was anything she *could* have done to defend herself. Koutarou and Maki’s teamwork was nearly flawless.

“Haaaaah!”

Koutarou’s attack struck true, claiming victory for himself and Maki. The blow didn’t hurt Crimson, but the sheer force of it staggered her and knocked her down.

“Ahh, I lost...”

In spite of that, Crimson was smiling. She’d been bested in a two-against-one match, but she was still satisfied with the experience.

“You really are amazing. You’re probably stronger than any other single fighter I know on their own,” said Koutarou. He knew he’d only won with Maki’s help, so he respected what Crimson was capable of.

“You’re only saying that because you haven’t fought Nana,” Crimson replied.

“She’s stronger than anyone, for sure.”

“Then let me rephrase—fighting you is fun,” Koutarou continued, holding out his hand to Crimson.

“That much I can agree with. Fighting you is fun too.”

She took it without hesitation and stood up. This brought her face to face with Koutarou, and he took the opportunity to ask her something that had been on his mind.

“By the way... what had you distracted there at the end?” he whispered so that Maki couldn’t hear. With his spirit sight, he’d seen Crimson drop her guard at the last moment.

“So you could tell, eh? I sensed your bond with Maki. I was thinking about how happy she must be,” Crimson answered in an equally hushed voice. She didn’t want Maki to overhear her, but saying it to Koutarou was a little embarrassing too. She was blushing faintly.

“I see. Crimson, why don’t you bring Green next time? I’m sure that’ll help Aika-san understand that you’re happy too.”

“Koutarou...” Crimson’s eyes went wide. She pressed a hand to her chest, then gave Koutarou a dubious sidelong glance. “Now I see how you seduced Maki.”

For the briefest instant, she’d genuinely been touched. With no instinct for or experience with romance, however, she was able to pull through. It was truly a close call.

“I haven’t seduced anyone,” Koutarou argued.

“Men really are stupid. You don’t even know what you’re doing...”

“What are you on about now?”

Crimson was exasperated, but Koutarou simply cocked his head. All he could think was that Crimson was accusing him of nonsense. Women remained a mystery to him.

“What are you two talking about?” Maki asked.

“About how dense your man is,” Crimson grumbled.

“He’s not when it really matters, so it’s okay.”

“This is all because you keep spoiling him...”

“Sorry, but how is that related?” Koutarou asked.

“My god, you really are an idiot!” Crimson shouted.

“Rude,” Koutarou shot back.

“Now, now, you two...”

By the time their battle was over, Koutarou and Crimson had gotten a little closer. They were both near and dear to Maki, so she welcomed this development. Even as she played mediator between them, she wouldn’t have minded letting them go on a little longer.

Once Koutarou left school for his part-time job, the two magical girls went out into town. Crimson had come all this way to see Maki, so Maki wanted to show her a good time. Moreover, Crimson would be leaving again soon and the gate back to Folsaria was in the city.

“See? It really suits you. You’re tall, so this sort of outfit shows off your long legs,” explained Maki.

The former Dark Navy had chosen a pair of long pants and a tunic for herself. Meanwhile, Crimson wanted nothing to do with skirts, so Maki had picked out a pair of pants with a belt and a tee for a feminine look. And she’d expected, they looked good on her friend.

“These clothes will fall apart if I get into a fight,” Crimson complained.

Crimson was puzzled by the outfit. It wasn’t easy to move in like her usual clothes. It was too tight, and she knew it would tear if she tried to fight in it.

“Then please try not to get in a fight while wearing this outfit, Crimson,” said Maki.

Crimson was enamored with destruction, but somehow, the thought of destroying these clothes bothered her. Maki couldn’t help but find that funny.

She understood the sentiment, however. She knew it was only because the clothes were a gift from a good friend, so she held her laughter in.

“It’s totally not my style, though,” Crimson grumbled as she dubiously beheld herself in the mirror. Maki had given the outfit her seal of approval, but Crimson wasn’t totally convinced. She knew she was too rough around the edges.

“Nobody in this town knows you, so they won’t *know* it’s not your style. They’ll just see a beautiful girl when they look at you.”

“I dunno...”

In spite of Crimson’s doubts, Maki was confident. And Crimson soon got a taste of what Maki was talking about—although she didn’t particularly enjoy it.

After the boutique, the girls stopped by the salon, where Crimson underwent a complete and total transformation. She now looked like a tall beauty with absolutely no hint of a violent streak.

“I swear, it’s just one guy after another... Take a closer look at someone before you hit on them!” she growled.

Crimson was personally unhappy with her makeover, as her new look was attracting a lot of men. Every twenty steps or so, a new guy would call out to her. So before Crimson could blow her lid and punch one out, Maki took her into a cafe.

“Heh, they *did* look carefully before calling out to you. There aren’t many girls prettier than you out on the streets.”

“I’m not interested in anyone who only cares about my looks,” Crimson hissed.

“I can agree with that.”

“Besides, they’re all weaklings.”

That was the greatest point of irritation to her. Not a single strong-looking man had shown any interest. Even on Earth, power meant everything to her. She dug into her cake in frustration, and the wonderful strawberry mousse

helped soothe her. She was so angry that she quickly plowed through to her third dessert.

“Heh, I like the weaker ones myself,” Maki said, narrowing her eyes and shrugging lightly.

She didn’t see eye to eye with Crimson on the matter. Maki knew there was more to a man than his strength. But instead of criticizing her friend’s point of view, she wanted to help her see the light.

“You’re talking about *him*, aren’t you?”

“Well, yes...”

Maki blushed and bashfully scratched at her cheek. She needed Koutarou in her life, but she also wanted to be needed herself. That wouldn’t happen if Koutarou were *too* strong.

“You can’t call a guy like him weak, though,” said Crimson.

“Really?” replied Maki.

“Someone who acknowledges their own weakness is in the process of *becoming* strong.”

“That sounds really convincing coming from you.”

“Think about it. No one has ever scorned him for his weakness, have they?”

“You’re right... I think we all want to help him overcome it.”

Maki dug into her own cake to hide her embarrassment. She was so preoccupied that she could barely taste the chocolate.

“That’s what brought you into the light,” said Crimson.

“I suppose so... Yes, I think you’re right.”

Wanting to help Koutarou wasn’t the only thing that had drawn Maki into the light, but that was how it had started. That desire taught her to see the world, herself, and the friends around her with compassion. Crimson didn’t think that was a weakness at all, for accepting one’s own weaknesses was a form of strength unto itself. Maki could agree with that much.

“Maki, there’s something I’ve learned from spending today with you.”

“Hmm? What’s that?”

“You really belong in the light.” Crimson stopped eating her cake to look up at Maki. Perhaps because of the change in topic, her frustration had waned and she was smiling now.

“I’ve learned something too,” said Maki.

“Yeah?”

“You’d be able to live in the light too.”

Maki had come to the same conclusion about her friend. What she’d once wanted for Crimson was now something Crimson had the power to achieve herself. Maki believed in her.

“It’s not my style.”

“I felt the same way at first. Including about dressing up, but you managed to do that today.”

“Ugh.”

The path Crimson was currently walking was one Maki had already tread. She understood it well. It was full of unknown joys, excitement, and great bewilderment. There would be the desire to cling to her old ways and deny that anything was different. Maki knew that, so there was no way Crimson could fool her.

“Besides, if it wasn’t true, there’s no way you’d come visit an old friend on your day off just because,” Maki said with a joyful smile. She put her hand in her purse and pulled out a folded handkerchief to reach over and wipe some cream off of Crimson’s cheek. “With how much you’ve grown, you can live as yourself now, Karen—even if that means wanting to become the strongest in the light.”

Karen was Crimson’s real name. Only Maki knew it, and she rarely used it. It lent a special power to what she said. Even so, Crimson couldn’t fully agree. Changing was hard. Even if she was slowly seeing it happen to her, it was hard to admit.

“Don’t call me Karen... If anyone else did that, I’d coldcock them.”

“If you’re going to hit me, wait until after I’ve finished my cake.”

“You really have changed...”

“You think so? Thank you.”

Maki smiled happily, and when she saw it, Crimson couldn't help thinking about how different the two of them were. And yet Maki's lifestyle of smiling, dressing up, and eating cake... Crimson didn't hate it.

Episode 3: The Next Magical Girl and Cooperator

Things were strange for Nana. The mysterious workings of fate had brought to light the secret origins of the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria. The civil war in the Holy Galactic Empire of Forthorthe was almost like an extension of Folsaria's struggle, including Darkness Rainbow's involvement. Darkness Rainbow had always advocated the Folsarians return to their long-lost home. Rainbow Heart, meanwhile, had long believed that Folsaria should clean up its own mess. The divide in opinion created a great deal of friction between the organizations.

Darkness Rainbow ultimately losing to Rainbow Heart, however, had ushered in a new era of cooperation between the two. And that cooperation developed even further when Folsaria's true origins were discovered. The leaders of Darkness Rainbow were thus assigned as magical emissaries of a sort to Forthorthe, and Nana was assigned to accompany them.

"To be honest, I have mixed feelings about this," she said, furrowing her brow.

Darkness Rainbow had been Folsaria's sworn enemy until just recently. They'd committed a great many crimes that could not simply be overlooked or forgotten. Yet Nana understood that the girls of Darkness Rainbow had begun to change ever since their final battle with Rainbow Heart. While they'd resorted to different means, Darkness Rainbow had fought for the same ends—protecting their allies and making a better world. And at the culmination of the Forthorthian civil war, they'd jumped in to help save the universe from ruin. In the end, it was impossible to hate them. Even so, emotions ran high regarding their involvement. And yet... joining forces with them was necessary for the sake of everyone's future. As Nana had implied, the situation was complex.

"The feeling's mutual. I can hardly believe we're sitting down for tea together. If you had told my past self that this would be happening, I would've thought you were crazy," Purple said with a chuckle.

Purple understood exactly how Nana felt. By the end of the civil war, the

individual members of Darkness Rainbow had all lost their reasons for joining the organization in the first place. Purple, for example, could no longer resurrect her late lover. Each and every one of the Darkness Rainbow girls had come to reassess what they fought for. They'd come to realize the value of their allies and re-realize the group's initial objective of returning to their ancestral home.

Thanks to Elexis's help, they were finally able to take their first steps toward moving to Forthorthe. It wasn't how they'd envisioned it happening, but that didn't change the fact that they were now on the right path. They'd inherited Elexis's vision of making the universe a better place. And to that end, they were willing to work with anyone—be it Nana or Rainbow Heart. They would fight back their mixed emotions in service of carrying out their mission, just like Nana did.

"I'm sure that Maki would say something about being true to your most important feelings and that nothing else matters," Crimson offered. She then tossed up a cookie and caught it in her mouth before washing it down with some tea. Her insight was praiseworthy, but her behavior not so much.

"Are you sick, Crimson?!" Green, who was gracefully sipping tea next to her, asked in shock. She took no issue with Crimson's table manners; it was what Crimson had said that alarmed her.

"Rude!" Crimson shot back. "I think about stuff from time to time too!"

"For example?" Green asked.

"Like how deep fighting can be. Or how certain people are fun to fight."

"And how you'll do what it takes to keep a certain someone from getting away...?"

"Yup. Even if that means working with Rainbow Heart."

Green was worried at first that Crimson wasn't sounding like herself, but upon prying deeper, she realized that wasn't the case at all. Crimson just wanted a good fight, and she'd do anything it took to get it. That was just like her after all. Green couldn't help laughing.

"Seriously. Rude," Crimson grumbled as she grabbed her cup. She was

insulted to be laughed at for being so honest, which made the tea taste bitter to her.

“Our true feelings, huh?” Nana mused. “Yeah, that’s the ticket...”

“Nana?” Purple called out to her.

“My apologies. I need to go see an old friend,” Nana said, hopping down from her too-tall stool before bowing to the three Darkness Rainbow girls.

“Ah, you’re going to see Kanae?” asked Purple. She’d quickly discerned who Nana was talking about based on her choice of words. Most of Nana’s contacts were in Folsaria, so there weren’t that many people she would need to make a special trip to go see.

“You know Kanae-san?” Nana asked.

“Oh, do I look that old to you?” Purple asked in turn.

“That’s why I’m curious.”

“The previous Purple informed me of all the trouble you two put her through.”

“Did she also mention Kanae-san’s daughter, Sanae-chan?”

“To be so tormented by two generations... Fate truly can be cruel,” Purple answered with a shrug.

Dark Purple had always been skilled with necromancy, a branch of magic that specialized in converting mana into spiritual energy to attack and to control spirits and the dead. Anyone with a large amount of spiritual energy was a natural rival in her eyes, and the Higashihongan family was rich with it. Two generations of Higashihongan women had now plagued two generations of Dark Purples.

“Is this friend of yours strong?!” Crimson asked excitedly.

“Crimson, you just came home from playing with Navy... Jeez,” Green complained.

“She was strong in the past, but it has been a while since she retired and I don’t think she’s as good as she was back then.”

“Then I’m not interested. You can go by yourself.”

“That was the plan. If I don’t go see her now, I’ll be so busy soon that I won’t get a chance to at all.”

The two most important people in the world to Nana were Kanae and Yurika. She could see Yurika whenever she wanted, however, so she wanted to make sure she got in a visit with Kanae while she could. That would be her own way of being true to her feelings. She, too, wanted to ensure a better world for Kanae and her daughter—even if that meant working with Darkness Rainbow.

The news that Nana and Darkness Rainbow had recently delivered to Folsaria—that the Holy Galactic Empire of Forthorthe was prepared to accept Folsarian immigrants—threw the kingdom into a tumult. Nana’s schedule was immediately cleared after the fact in order to give the council of elders time to convene. Thanks to that, Nana and Darkness Rainbow both ended up with a few days off, and Nana was now using that time to visit Kanae.

“Heh, this place hasn’t changed at all. Sure takes me back...”

Upon stepping through the magical gate, Nana arrived in Kisshouharukaze and proceeded toward the Higashihongan estate. She’d once been in charge of the newly formed city and was headed to an old friend’s house, so even after all these years, she still knew the way.

“You should stay for dinner.”

“I couldn’t impose on you...”

“It’s fine! A cooperator isn’t limited to helping with investigations and combat!”

Nana recalled all sorts of fond memories as she walked down the road. Kanae meant a lot to her, and the thought of seeing her again made Nana’s heart flutter. There was a spring in her step as she went.

“Here I come, Sanae-chan!”

“Do your worst!”

As she got closer, Nana could hear hearty shouting from the estate garden.

Both voices were familiar to her and put a smile on her face. She broke into a hearty run herself.

“I see you’re here too, Yurika-chan!”

When Nana reached the house, she found just who’d expected to see—Nijino Yurika, who meant just as much to her as Kanae did. Hearing Nana’s excited voice call out to her, Yurika reflexively turned to look, and when she did...

“Nana-sa— Ack!”

A badminton shuttlecock slammed into her face. The birdie was too light to do any real damage, but it was enough to surprise Yurika and knock her off balance. With the shuttlecock still buried in her cheek, she tumbled to the ground.



“Yurika-chan!” Nana shouted.

“Nana-san... I didn’t know you were here...” Yurika groaned.

“I-I’m sorry! I should have thought twice before calling out to you!”

Nana hurriedly ran over to help Yurika up. Fortunately, the younger magical girl wasn’t hurt aside from a red spot on her face.

“It’s fine,” said Yurika. “This is nothing. It was just an accident.”

Yurika ordinarily would have whined up a storm, but Nana was special to her too. Instead of complaining, she offered her dear mentor a smile. Relieved that her protégé was all right, Nana then turned to Sanae.

“Yay, it’s Nana!” Sanae cheered.

“Hello there, Sanae-chan,” Nana greeted her.

“And are you okay?” Sanae asked, looking at Yurika.

“I’m good,” Yurika said as she got up. She rubbed her butt a little in apparent pain, but she quickly smiled again for her friend too.

“Are you here to see my mom?” Sanae asked eagerly, turning back to Nana with sparkling eyes.

To Sanae, Nana was the *original* real magical girl and an object of great admiration. Nana had actually lost the majority of her mana, but since it had been to protect Yurika, that only made Sanae respect her more. The additional fact that Nana was her mother’s partner was the coolest of all to Sanae.

“I am,” Nana answered politely. Sanae was both Kanae’s daughter and Yurika’s friend, so she inherently meant a great deal to Nana as well. “Is she in?”

“Yeah. She should be out here any minute now,” Sanae replied.

Kanae had found the girls preparing to play badminton and excitedly agreed to join them for a game. Since she was wearing traditional Japanese clothing, however, she’d had to go change into something more conducive to the sport. And just as Sanae explained this, Kanae arrived.

“Sanae, Yurika-chan! Sorry for— My, if it isn’t Nana-chan!”

“It’s been a while, Kanae-san.”

Kanae had been taking tennis lessons with the neighborhood housewives and felt primed for battle. Nana was thrilled to see her old friend again, but the reunion was a little awkward for Kanae. The two women went back over a decade. Unlike her husband, Soutarou, Kanae hailed from a normal family that was simply blessed with abundant spiritual energy. She’d never received formal training in using it, so she instead relied on her intuition. She’d thus performed exceptionally well in archery during high school and university, which was how she met Nana. It could even be said that her intuition was what led to Nana’s fateful fight with Darkness Rainbow.

When magical girls’ identities were exposed to normal people, the standard protocol was to erase their memories. If certain conditions were met, however, the magical girl could request their assistance instead. In Kanae’s case, she was strong both mentally and physically. She also had a sense of justice and psychic powers. Nana had thus made the decision to join forces with her. Between Kanae’s bow and Nana’s magic, they’d made an unusual team capable of thwarting Darkness Rainbow time and time again. They were a persistent thorn in the evil magical girls’ side at the time, and so Darkness Rainbow had hatched a nefarious plot to steal Sanae’s spiritual energy and put pressure on Kanae.

Kanae stopped working with Nana when her daughter was hospitalized—but it wasn’t by choice. Nana had been the one to ask her to retire. Sanae was targeted because of Kanae’s connection to Nana, and Nana didn’t want any other harm to befall her. Their union was thus dissolved, and the two women went their separate ways.

It wasn’t until some time later that they crossed paths again, after Nana had been devastated in battle with Darkness Rainbow. Since then, Koutarou and his many companions had worked to restore Nana’s body with elaborate prosthetics. Nana had been in her new body for months now, but she’d been so busy that she hadn’t had the time to visit Kanae. Her former cooperator was thrilled to see her.

“You look so good, Nana-chaaaaan!”

None of that was the reason the reunion was awkward for Kanae. She was

simply embarrassed to be caught in her tennis outfit—but that only lasted for a moment. She quickly switched gears and welcomed Nana with a big hug. Nana was like a second daughter to her, and her tight embrace was an expression of that love.

“Th-That hurts, Kanae-san.”

To be honest, Nana had anticipated—or hoped, rather—that Kanae would respond this way. Nana easily could have dodged her if she’d wanted, but she willingly let Kanae wrap her arms around her. Just as Kanae saw Nana like a daughter, Nana saw Kanae like a mother.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Kanae apologized. “I was just so excited to see you.”

Seeing Nana in pain, Kanae relaxed her grip a little, but she didn’t let go. She was too happy to see Nana looking as healthy as she had in the past.

“You look good too, Kanae-san.”

“Maybe, but I’m not as lithe as I used to be...”

“Don’t worry. You always hugged me like that.”

“Oh, you...”

Nana was equally glad to see Kanae acting like her old self. She’d been afraid to hug the former magical girl so tightly the last time they’d seen each other for fear of her fragility. The fact that she was willing to do it now made Nana incredibly happy. She’d be forever grateful to Koutarou and the others who’d made this possible.

“Nana-san and Kanae-san really are good friends,” Yurika remarked, watching over them with a smile.

There was a time Kanae and Nana had kept their distance from each other out of mutual concern for one another. But things were different now. The battle with Darkness Rainbow was over, and they could freely meet as friends without worry. Yurika thought it was wonderful.

“A real friend’s a beautiful thing to have. All’s good that ends good,” Sanae agreed, nodding repeatedly. She was proud that the magical girl she respected so much and her mother were such close friends—as proud as if she’d had

something to do with it.

“Mama, you two used to raise hell and stuff, right?!” she asked eagerly. She’d only heard bits and pieces of stories, so she was dying to know the truth.

“No, I just helped Nana-chan since she’s not from around here,” Kanae replied.

“But Nana said that you would mercilessly beat up anyone you didn’t like!”

“Nana-chan said *what*?!”

“I didn’t put it like that!” Nana shouted in her own defense.

In reality, the truth was quite different from what Sanae had imagined. Both Kanae and Nana were quick to set the record straight.

“We did not, as a matter of fact, ever raise any hell! We worked together to protect the city,” Kanae corrected her.

“So you never beat up anyone *to* protect the city?” Sanae asked.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Sanae-chan!” Nana cut in. “Kanae-san never beat up anyone she didn’t like. She gallantly defeated evil demons and magical girls.”

“Huh, so you two were kinda like me and Yurika,” Sanae mused.

“What a bummer,” Yurika threw in.

Sanae was disappointed that her dreams of hearing about her mother’s rowdy days were dashed. Yurika was similarly let down, although in her case, she’d been hoping to hear a story like something out of her favorite manga.

“But you were both strong, right?” Sanae asked.

“Well... I suppose you could say that,” her mother replied.

“Kanae-san was known as the Swift Archer,” Nana added.

“That’s so cool! Did you have that embroidered on the back of your jacket like some delinquent?!” Sanae asked further, her eyes sparkling once again.

“I did not! Stop trying to make me out to be a delinquent!”

“Whaaat?”

“That’s enough, young lady!”

Sanae had always had a mental image of her mother being wild in her younger years—the perfect partner for a real magical girl. She was crushed to find out that wasn't even close to true.

“So you were just a normal friend to Nana? That's a disappointment...” she complained.

“*What* is a disappointment, exactly?” Kanae asked.

“How strong was Kanae-san really?” Yurika jumped in rather tactlessly.

Both girls knew firsthand just how strong Nana was, but Kanae was a different story. They'd fought alongside her once and they still weren't sure. Yurika was hoping to get the full scoop from Nana.

“Why, she was very— Oh, I know! I have a great idea,” Nana said with a smile. She then leveled the badminton racket in her hand at a confused Yurika. “Since we're all here, why don't we have a showdown between the old and new generations.”

“Nana-chan, are you serious?!” Kanae asked in shock.

“I am. I'm curious to see what you can do nowadays, Kanae-san.”

“You're still so young, but I'm not quite as...”

“Even so, doesn't being underestimated by the next generation rub you the wrong way?”

“Ugh... You're right. It's on!”

In the past, the genius magical girl and the Swift Archer had been an unbeatable duo. They'd only disbanded to protect one another. And today, they were joining forces once more. The battlefield was only a badminton court, but there was something special about being able to work together again. The two women smiled at each other and shared an enthusiastic high five.

“Bwa ha ha, it looks like Mama and Nana are raring to go!” Sanae cheered.

“Are we gonna be okay...?” Yurika muttered.

“Not with that attitude! You gotta get yourself fired up! The new duo in town is here to kick butt!”

“When did we become a duo...?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff! Anyways, get pumped!”

“Rrrright!”

Up against Nana and Kanae were a self-proclaimed magical girl and a self-proclaimed beautiful psychic. Despite the “self-proclaimed” part, they were both well trained and experienced. They had no idea what kind of battle they were in for, but they had no intention of losing. They were going to give this fight their all—and win.

None of the four ladies were serious badminton players, so the rules of their match were fairly lax. When serving, for example, they were allowed to stand on whichever side made it easier for them. Without such concessions, the match would have been a real struggle—especially for Yurika.

“Here I gooooo!”

Yurika stood on the right side of the court and served to the left, where Nana stood on the opposite side of the net. She knew it was her good side after playing around a little with Sanae earlier. The shuttlecock sailed lightly through the air in an arc toward her mentor.

“I’m starting to get the hang of this!” Nana called, using her petite body to her advantage in returning the serve.

This was Nana’s first time playing badminton, but she looked nothing like an amateur. Her form was already looking better than Yurika’s. She was living up to her reputation as a genius.

“Then it’s about time to get serious!” Sanae shouted.

Sanae took a swing at the ball and sent it flying back over the net with beautiful form. She played badminton frequently, and while she wasn’t as good as someone on a badminton team, she was quite skilled when it came to handling a racket.

“Slow down! I still haven’t shaken off all of the rust!” Kanae cried.

Kanae, on the other hand, was having a hard time. Her intuition had been

even sharper than Sanae's when she was young, but she wasn't as spry as she'd been back then. She didn't have as much stamina now either. She was indeed rusty. She improved over the course of a few rallies, but she was still floundering.

"Don't mind her!" Sanae shouted. "Smash that birdie, Yurika!"

"Okaaay!"

Unfortunately for Sanae, the new generation was notoriously impatient. Unable to wait any longer, they brought their full strength to bear in the middle of the match.

"Wh-Whoa!" Kanae was in the middle of adjusting her grip on her racket when Yurika smashed the shuttlecock her way, leaving her slow to respond.

"Don't worry! I got it!" Nana called to her, leaping into the shuttlecock's trajectory and dexterously hitting it back.

"Thank you, Nana-chan!"

"Our enemy gives no quarter!"

"Right!"

At that, the look in Kanae's eyes changed. Even if her intuition wasn't what it used to be, she still had her old instincts to rely on. Back when encounters with evil magical girls were a daily occurrence for her, she'd honed her sense of battle—and that sense was starting to kick in again. If she thought of this match like a proper battle, she knew how to handle herself as a warrior.

"Uh, Yurika, my mom's starting to freak me out," Sanae said worriedly.

"Yeah. Reminds me of when she faced Maya-san," Yurika replied.

"So *this* is what she looks like when she gets rowdy..."

"Let's do our best to make sure she doesn't beat us to a pulp!"

Yurika had seen Kanae in a real fight before, and Sanae could detect the change in her spiritual energy. They were now both keenly aware that Kanae was not to be underestimated. Their battle was about to begin in earnest.

Kanae seemed completely different from just a few seconds ago. There was

no longer any hesitation in her movements, and she only grew sharper as the game continued. She was learning by doing. She alternated from static to dynamic, capitalizing on her current strength.

“Raaaaaaaah!” she roared as she took a swing from where she stood. Using her full height and all her muscles, she smashed the shuttlecock as hard as she could as soon as it entered her reach.

“Sanae-chan!” Yurika cried.

“No worries! Take this!” Sanae called back.

Kanae’s strike had sent the birdie sailing toward the most energetic player on the court, Sanae, who was able to return it.

“Grr, I guess I should have expected as much from my daughter,” Kanae growled, equal parts pleased and frustrated with Sanae’s play.

“You’re starting to sound like the Swift Archer I used to know, Kanae-san,” Nana couldn’t help giggling. She recognized Kanae’s style on the court. It was just like how she’d always fought with her bow—the perfect balance of stillness and swiftness.

“It’s too bad I’m the only one living up to my old name,” Kanae teased.

“Oh, we’ll see about that!” Nana shot back.

Sensing the change that had come over Kanae, Nana began to adopt her old tactics as well. In the past, she’d always moved swiftly and struck with powerful attacks that would keep opponents in Kanae’s range. In this situation, that would mean putting the opposing team on edge and forcing them to send weak returns Kanae’s way. With that in mind, Nana started targeting Yurika’s side of the court.

“Haaah!”

Yurika wouldn’t go down without a fight. She’d grown too much for that, and she wanted to show her mentor how far she’d come. That imbued her with an extraordinary amount of focus, and thanks to that, she was able to send Nana’s shot right back—right where Kanae was waiting for it.

“Classic Nana-chan... Hah!”

Once she was in position, all Kanae had to do was make the shot at max power. Ignoring the time it took for her to adapt, she was Nana's superior in terms of strength and speed. When she smashed the shuttlecock with all her might, it whistled violently as it tore through the air.

"Incoming!" Sanae shouted.

Sanae had predicted her mother's smash—but she couldn't stop it. It clipped her racket and changed directions, but still landed within the bounds of the court.

"Dang, I grazed it!"

She'd been oh-so close to stopping her mother, which made it all the more frustrating. That frustration, however, became fuel for the competitive fire growing in her heart.

"I'll get the next one, Mama, so you better prepare yourself!"

"That's the spirit, Sanae! It all comes down to guts!"

Both mother and daughter hated losing. They stood on opposite sides of the net with identical expressions on their faces. It was an endearing sight. Both Nana and Yurika smiled as they beheld it, and eventually, they too realized they were wearing identical expressions. Their smiles only widened.

The intense match went back and forth. At first, Sanae's and Yurika's youth gave them the advantage, but once Kanae and Nana regained their edge, they seized the lead. As a result, Sanae and Yurika took the first game, while Kanae and Nana took the second. The pairs were now intent to break the tie with a third and final game.

"You're pretty good, Sanae. You too, Yurika-chan!" Kanae cheered.

"Eeheehee! We're still active as magical girls after all!" replied Sanae.

"I can't be dependent on Nana-san forever!" Yurika threw in.

"That's the spirit, Yurika-chan!"

But by the time the final match rolled around, however, Kanae's breathing was starting to get ragged. She hadn't kept up her training in the long years that had passed since she and Nana parted ways, so she could scarcely keep up with

the other three. If not for her abundant spiritual energy, she likely wouldn't have made it to the final game in the first place. Her flagging stamina shifted the balance of power between the teams yet again, more or less putting them on even footing.

"Now that it's come to this, it's time to get serious," said Sanae, boasting the same mischievous grin she always wore right before pulling a prank.

"Oh, I've been serious this entire time," replied Kanae. "You haven't been, Sanae?"

"I've been taking this seriously as your daughter. But what if I take it seriously as a magical girl now?"

Sanae had indeed been fighting seriously. So had Yurika. But they'd only been playing as normal girls—meaning they hadn't been using their psychic powers or magic. Sanae was suggesting they change that.

"Interesting. I'm in! You're fine with that too, aren't you, Nana-chan?" asked Kanae.

"Strictly speaking, that would be against the rules. But we're all affiliated with Rainbow Heart here, so we could consider this a training exercise."

While Kanae was all for the idea, Nana had some reservations. This was the perfect opportunity to see how much Yurika had grown, however, so she caved in the end. This decision left Yurika the most nervous of all.

"Are you sure we'll be okay, Sanae-chan...?" she asked timidly.

As Nana's disciple, Yurika knew better than anyone else just how strong the genius magical girl was. In an anything-goes match, Yurika had no confidence they could beat her. Sanae, meanwhile, showed no such fear and approached her teammate with an emboldened look in her eyes.

"Either way we do this, Nana and my mom are both incredibly strong."

That being the case, Sanae wanted to fight them at their absolute best. She wanted to get a glimpse of her mom's glory days. Moreover, she didn't think the ultimate victor would be decided by the use of magic. The strong would win, regardless of what tools they had at their disposal. So why *not* go all out?

“O-Okay. I kinda wanna see them at the top of their game too.”

“Well said, Yurika! There’s a real woman for you!”

And so the group agreed to a final no-holds-barred match. Although Sanae had had many reasons for suggesting it, her primary concern was for her mother. Allowing the tired Kanae to use her special powers should make the game easier for her, and Sanae simply wanted to play more with her mother. That love was what truly motivated her.

“All right, Nana-chan, let’s do the usual!” called Kanae.

“Lightning Reflexes! Mighty Power!” Nana incanted.

“Let’s do this, Yurika! Full-Blast Maiden Power!” Sanae shouted.

“Mirage Image! Short Teleport! Modifier: Delay!” Yurika chanted.

In short order, the lights of magic and psychic powers started flying back and forth in the Higashihongan estate garden. Although the four women looked like ordinary people, they were all experienced fighters in their own rights. The match that was about to go down would be truly out of this world.

Now that Nana had enhanced her strength and reflexes, Kanae could smash the shuttlecock harder and faster than any pro. It made for a rather formidable attack.

“I won’t looooooseee!” Sanae shouted as she moved into position.

Kanae’s shots would have been difficult for a normal person to even follow with their eyes, but Sanae was on top of them. Even if she couldn’t see the birdie, she could sense it. With Kanae’s pinpoint aim, Sanae was able to read her moves and stay ahead of her. Nana, however, kept Sanae on her toes and running all around the court. Sanae was only able to keep up because she was heightening her physical abilities with her psychic powers and because of Yurika’s short-range teleportation magic.

“All right! Do it, Yurika!” Sanae cried.

She’d just barely managed to catch the birdie, so there wasn’t much strength in her swing. It was lazily sailing back toward Kanae and Nana—the perfect

opportunity for one of them to smash it. Thankfully, this was where Yurika came in.

“Activate Mirror Image!” she called.

As the shuttlecock sailed over the net, a dozen more appeared. They were illusions that Yurika had created to hide the real one.

“Quick Cast Amplifier!”

However, Nana and Kanae weren’t about to go down without a fight. Using the power of the staff built into her body, Nana cast a spell of her own to dispel Yurika’s magic and used her mana to amplify it. That reduced the flurry of shuttlecocks to three. Kanae’s intuition would take it from there.

“Good job, Nana-chan!” Kanae shouted.

Her beautiful swing at the real birdie sent it sailing back toward Sanae and Yurika’s side of the court. Yurika had just cast a spell, and Sanae had just landed from her jump shot. Kanae was sure that this would be the clincher.

“Not so fast!”

However, Sanae, who shouldn’t have been able to move, managed to return the shuttlecock. Despite her bent posture, she caught it just as it was about to hit the ground.

“What?!” Kanae gasped. She and Nana were both unable to respond as the birdie hit the ground at their feet. “What was that, Nana-chan? My daughter just flew through the air... That wasn’t Yurika-chan’s magic, was it?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that, but it seems Sanae-chan has a talent for psychic powers.”

“Psychic powers, huh? My daughter sure is something...”

Sanae proudly raised her index and middle fingers in a victorious V shape. She hadn’t exactly been hiding her powers, but they’d certainly caught Kanae and Nana off guard. She was quite pleased with herself.

“Well, if she can fly, we’ll just have to take that into consideration!” Kanae rallied.

“That’s my mama! Let’s see you get wild!” Sanae cheered her on.

“I’m not old enough to lose to my daughter yet!”

Although they’d just lost a point, Kanae and Nana had overcome far greater dangers in the past. They wouldn’t let this defeat them. In fact, they were even used to facing foes with the power of flight. Kanae looked at her daughter with a glint in her eye like she was enjoying herself. Meanwhile, Nana beheld Yurika with a softer look.

“Keep it up, Yurika-chan! You’re doing good, but your incantation gestures are getting a little sloppy because you’re tired.”

“I’ll be more careful!”

Nana had managed to dispel most of Yurika’s illusions because she’d been slow in casting the spell. If the younger magical girl had only been more precise, her team undoubtedly would have scored that last point sooner.

“No giving her advice in the middle of a match, Nana-chan,” scolded Kanae. “Save it for later.”

“Sorry, but I *do* want my disciple to get stronger.”

Nana apologized while sticking her tongue out. It was a special face she’d only show Kanae, and it disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared. She knew that Sanae and Yurika were no easy opponents.

The neck-and-neck competition continued for several more rounds. Kanae and Nana had the advantage in terms of technique, but Sanae and Yurika had more stamina. The younger girls gained more of an edge the longer the match dragged on. However, since the players were now allowed to use psychic powers and magic in any way except for directly on the shuttlecock and their opponents, wits and experience were just as important. The tense battle between the two teams took them straight to a deadlock deuce, with neither side able to seize the win.

“Kyaaaah!”

A meter-large shuttlecock hit Yurika in the forehead... but it barely hurt. The

moment it crashed into her, it returned to its original size and fell to her feet. Its size had only been an illusion.

“Aaaaaahhh, she got us! Nana, you’re pretty good!” Sanae wailed.

With that point, Nana and Kanae had caught up and the score was once again tied. The game was now 29-29. In tennis, play would continue until there was a clear victor; but in badminton, the first team to 30 would be declared the victor. Losing their single-point lead put them in a tight spot, but Sanae couldn’t help praising Nana. The giant shuttlecock had been a clever trick to keep the score even.

“I’m just glad it worked,” Nana said modestly.

“You really are good with magic, Nana-chan,” Kanae complimented her.

“I can understand why Darkness Rainbow hated fighting you,” remarked Sanae.

“Heehee. That’s my master,” giggled Yurika.

The illusion had been a simple one, requiring a minimal amount of mana to cast. The real key to the trick was timing. The illusion had taken effect right as Yurika was about to swing. That threw her off, making her uncertain where and how to hit such a massive target. Really, losing the point hadn’t been a demonstration of Yurika’s ineptitude. Rather, it was a testament to Nana’s mastery.

“Why do *you* sound so proud?” Sanae grilled her.

“Ah, right. I need to work hard too!”

“That’s right! This is the moment of truth!”

The girls had lost their lead, but Sanae and Yurika were still raring to go. Their goal wasn’t to win so much as it was to show off their power. Yurika wanted Nana to see how much she’d grown, and Sanae wanted to test her mother’s strength (as well as show off a little herself). They wanted to keep going all out.

“I’m relieved, Nana-chan,” said Kanae.

“Why?” Nana replied.

“It looks like you’ve really perked up. Yurika-chan and my daughter are both so strong.”

“It’s too early to let your guard down, Kanae-san. It is our responsibility to give our protégés a real run for their money.”

“You can say that again! Let’s do this, Nana-chan!”

“Indeed!”

Serves in badminton weren’t as dynamic as in tennis, but all the same mind games applied. Kanae purposefully aimed closer to Yurika than Sanae. Sanae’s range was huge, and her mother was intentionally striking right at the edge of it. Kanae’s goal was to make both of them hesitate over who should go for it.

“This one’s yours, Yurika,” Sanae called to her teammate.

“Okay!” Yurika responded.

Concerned about what trick Nana had up her sleeve, Sanae deferred to Yurika in favor of preparing for the next attack. With the countermeasures they had in place, she was confident they could take whatever Nana had in store for them.

“They’re starting to wise up to us!” Kanae cried. “What do we do?!”

“I have an idea! Just keep this going for a while!” Nana replied.

The rally continued for a while with the assistance of minor spells and a little psychic power, but both sides already understood each other’s attack patterns by now. That made it difficult to get a decisive edge, which meant the match would come down to pure badminton skill. The first to mess up would lose—and knowing that increased the tension for all four players.

“Aaahh, I’m terrible at this kinda stuff!” Yurika wailed.

“Hang in there!” Sanae shouted back. “We’ll clinch this soon! Show me your guts!”

“Now *this* is fun! This is what competition is all about!” Kanae roared.

“Here I go, Kanae-san!” Nana cried.

As the tension reached its peak, Nana made her move. She hit the shuttlecock to the younger girls and launched into a chant. This was it. This would be the

final showdown.

“Over here, darling!” Kanae called.

“Mama?!” Sanae replied in shock. “Why are there two of you?!”

While the younger girls’ eyes were glued on the birdie, Nana had turned into Kanae. Sanae and Yurika weren’t sure if it was an illusion or a full-blown transformation, but they knew one thing for certain... They were in trouble.

“Yurika, blow that magic away!” Sanae instructed.

“Okay!”

The shuttlecock was en route to Yurika’s side of the court, but Sanae made a mad dash to return it. She was buying time for Yurika to break through Nana’s magic. Little did she know that was exactly what Nana wanted.

“Quick Cast Anti-Magic Field!”

Yurika dispelled Nana’s magic, and when she did, something truly surprising happened. One Kanae turned back into Nana—but the second Kanae disappeared entirely. As far as the girls knew, nothing should have happened to her. Yet lo and behold, the *real* Kanae abruptly appeared mid-smash.

“Mama?! Oh nooo!”

“K-Kanae-san?! How?!”

It turned out that Nana had doublecast—one illusion spell and one invisibility spell. She’d disguised herself with the first and hidden Kanae with the second, all while the girls believed that she’d only cast a single spell. It was a basic enough diversion, but one that was difficult to detect in such a tense situation when everyone was focused on the game-deciding shuttlecock. Rainbow Nana was still a genius, even in her retirement.

“Take this!”

With Kanae so close to the net, her smash came even quicker than normal. She swung with all her might too. Even if Sanae or Yurika had been able to respond in kind with their maximum strength, they wouldn’t be able to handle that. The birdie whistled through the air and slammed into the ground at their feet.

Even after the match, Sanae and Yurika were still training with rackets in hand. Sanae hated losing, so she'd demanded a rematch and had eagerly begun training for it. Yurika normally didn't have a competitive streak, but things were different when Nana and Kanae were involved. She wanted to put Nana at ease by showing off how strong she'd become, so she'd joined Sanae for extra training.

"One thing I learned for sure is that Mama and Nana are *super* strong," said Sanae.

"If we could be like them, we could do almost anything," replied Yurika.

"The goal's within reach! I'm sure we can do it if we just try harder! We'll beat them next time!"

"Yeah!"

As for the winning team, they were watching Sanae and Yurika through the large window in the parlor. They'd gone inside to take a break after their victory.

"They sure are full of energy... They're still going at it," remarked Nana.

"They're young, after all," added Kanae.

The two women were enjoying some tea as they watched the girls train. They didn't have as much energy as Sanae and Yurika. Kanae was past that time in her life, and Nana had lost the stamina necessary to continuously cast magic when she was grievously injured in the fight that forced her into retirement. They'd both hit their limit.

"I tell you," began Nana, "that vigor of theirs is a serious threat. Our game just now was a close one."

"They're growing so fast," said Kanae.

"If their friends had been here to cheer them on, I imagine they would've come out on top..."

"You're right. Those two don't work very hard for themselves."

Kanae and Nana had won the match, but only by a narrow margin. Under different circumstances, or if they'd been forced to play another game, victory would have gone to the younger girls. They were sure of that.

"Maybe retiring was the right choice," mused Nana.

"Yes, I believe it's our duty to entrust things to the next generation without being too intrusive," agreed Kanae.

Both women believed it was time to pass the torch, and while they were happy their disciple or daughter had become stronger, it still saddened them. Nana and Kanae had grown weaker and could no longer endure practical work. It could be said that their value as a team had diminished. They knew they'd be fools to try to deny that, but they still clung dearly to the old days they'd spent together in their hearts. No one could blame them for wanting those to go on a little longer.

"Without being too intrusive, huh...?" Nana murmured as she looked out the window. Yurika and Sanae were currently living out the wonderful days she remembered. It was a bittersweet sight.

"Not yet, Nana-chan. It's still too early to pull back entirely."

Kanae, however, saw things a little differently. Even though it was time to pass the torch, it was too early yet to step back and bask in nostalgia. They weren't out of the race altogether, for there were things they still needed to do.

"Kanae-san...?"

"Nana-chan, you've only retired from combat, haven't you?"

"Well, yes. I'm here on assignment to act as an emissary of sorts."

"Then why don't you and I get back together and revive the old team?"

"What...?"

"When it comes to work like that, I'm *definitely* better than you."

As a former magical girl, Nana would be serving as a mediator and advisor for various forces in the future. Kanae had been doing something similar all along as the wife of a shrine priest. She could still be of help to Nana in that regard—certainly much more than the younger girls like Sanae and Yurika could.

“Are you sure?” Nana asked hesitantly.

“Of course. We don’t have to worry about Darkness Rainbow attacking these days, and I don’t have my hands full with Sanae anymore. Besides, doesn’t it sit wrong with you to leave everything to the kids?”

“Kanae-san...”

Kanae’s proposal was an attractive one. Neither she nor Nana were as strong as they’d once been, but there was still plenty they could do. They could still work together to protect the peace of the world, just like they had in their heyday. It would mean putting Kanae at risk, however, so Nana furrowed her brow to ponder the matter.

“So, what’ll it be?” Kanae pressed her.

“...I’ll be counting on you.”

In the end, Nana accepted Kanae’s offer. Their work would be diplomatic in nature, which was far less dangerous than their old line of work. Even if a threat did arise, Nana could personally protect Kanae. She wasn’t good in a long fight, but she was confident she could do at least that much. Moreover, she simply couldn’t resist the temptation of working with her old partner again. Nana loved Kanae, after all.

“You’re being awfully honest today,” Kanae remarked.

“I learned from the girls that sometimes it’s better to be honest,” Nana replied.

“Don’t let them rub off on you *too* much, okay?”

“Ahaha!”

And so Rainbow Nana and the Swift Archer were set to make their comeback. They wouldn’t be out on any combat missions and it was unlikely that they would make a name for themselves, but they didn’t care. After years of being apart, they were simply thrilled at the chance to relieve the wonderful time they’d spent together.

Episode 4: Imminent Departure! The People Packing!

Room 106 was pure pandemonium as the Corona House crew prepared to leave for Forthorthe. The trip was just a few short days away, and the journey would be a long one. There was much to be done. The necessary paperwork had already been taken care of, but there was still luggage to pack and other arrangements to make. Most everyone was busy.

“All righty! We, the lovely Sanaes, will take care of buying snacks!” Sanae-chan announced.

“Would you mind lending me a hand before you go out shopping?” asked Shizuka.

“Only if you help me carry my bags later!”

“It’s a deal! Thanks.”

“Clan-dono,” called Kiriha. “We’ve received word that the joint training exercise will take place as planned.”

“I suppose we can’t miss that. Can you handle it, Pardomshiha, Yurika?” asked Clan.

“I shall make the arrangements,” replied Ruth.

“I’ll do my best,” agreed Yurika.

“I need to go stock up on cat food for Snoozy,” remarked Maki.

“I’ll accompany you. I want parts for my bike, since we don’t have them back in Forthorthe,” added Theia.

“Would you mind if I tagged along as well?” asked Harumi. “I’m afraid my wardrobe might be a bit lacking... Theiamillis-san, there will be ceremonies and other such formal occasions, won’t there?”

“Indeed. But you can wear your uniform— Oh, that’s right. You already

graduated.”

“That’s why I was hoping to get your and Maki-san’s advice while shopping.”

At present, the girls were having a meeting about the various chores and things that still needed to be taken care of before their departure. With so much to do, the plan was to divide and conquer. Nalfa and Kotori were doing something similar over in room 105. This left only the boys with free time on their hands.

“I guess the girls all need plenty of time to get ready,” muttered Kenji, who was sitting on the ceiling with the assistance of Clan’s antigravity device.

Koutarou, who was sitting next to him, responded, “I mean, there’s plenty to do. We’d never get it all done without the girls. We’d be screwed without them.”

“Pretty sad when you think about it...”

“Yeah, we only get to sit on our hands because we’re useless.”

“Meow.”

Kenji and Koutarou’s conversation was interrupted by Snoozy. The cat usually enjoyed being doted on by the girls, but they were too busy for him today, so he crawled into Koutarou’s lap instead. Snoozy was already used to the variable gravity and had walked straight up the wall to get to the boys on the ceiling.

“That’s right, Snoozy,” Koutarou said with a smile. “We’re in the same boat.”

Koutarou had already completed his own personal preparations for the trip. He’d packed everything he would need into the large backpack that he used when traveling for baseball. He didn’t have much in the way of luggage to begin with, and since he’d been to Forthorthe before, he knew exactly what to take with him. As a result, he’d finished up well before the girls and was as free as Snoozy.

“More importantly, Kou...” Kenji began.

“Hmm?”

“Meow?”

“You gotta help me!” he begged, suddenly in tears. Despite seeming so cavalier, Kenji was actually a rather serious boy and rarely cried in front of others.

“What now?!” Koutarou reacted in shock.

“Kotori won’t forgive me! In fact, she won’t even talk to me anymore! This has never happened before! I really need your help!” Kenji pleaded, grabbing hold of Koutarou’s shoulders and shaking him.

As Koutarou stopped him, he replied, “I mean, I’ve never seen Kin-chan this angry either. How am I supposed to know what to do?”

Kenji had been in hot water with his sister for some time, but the rift between them had come to a head when they were conscripted for the Forthorthe trip. Kotori had blown up on him and wouldn’t even give him the time of day now.

“Don’t be so heartless!” Kenji shouted.

“You have no choice but to apologize, dude!” Koutarou shouted back.

“I guess so... I know that, but I just...” Kenji leaned over the tea table, which had been banished to the ceiling along with the boys, and sobbed. He loved his little sister, so getting the cold shoulder from her was excruciating to him.

That was about when said sister entered room 106 through the hole in the wall with a tray in her hands. Nalfa followed shortly behind her, also carrying a tray. They’d brought tea and treats so the girls of room 106 could take a short break from their work.

“Everyone, we brought tea!” called Kotori.

“And cake! Take whichever piece you’d like!” called Nalfa.

The three Sanaes and Yurika threw their arms up into the air and shouted in celebration as the other girls quickly began clearing off the table they’d brought in for their meeting. They were all eager for a breather and something sweet to eat. Kotori and Nalfa set cups and plates down in front of all the girls, then moved up to the ceiling.

“Have some, Kou-niisan,” Kotori offered.

“Mackenzie, Kin-chan’s going to serve us tea,” Koutarou said, prodding Kenji

with his elbow. He saw this as a good chance for the two siblings to reconcile.

“R-Right.”

Koutarou and Kenji went way back, so Kenji immediately understood what his best friend meant. He immediately turned to his sister to say something, but before he could open his mouth...

“I don’t have anything for that louse,” Kotori said bluntly. Her eyes were ice cold, but her words burned. She wanted nothing to do with Kenji. She still couldn’t forgive him for choosing his date with Emily over everyone else’s safety.

“Y-You know, I can understand why you’re mad, Kin-chan,” Koutarou began, “but if you stay angry forever, it makes *you* look like the bad guy. At least try to rein it in around other people, okay?”

“Er, um... I’m sorry, Kou-niisan.”

After Koutarou’s reluctant scolding, Kotori calmed down a little. Even though Kotori was upset with Kenji, she certainly didn’t want to take it out on anyone else. She was a calm and gentle girl by nature, but she couldn’t help being stern with those who ran afoul of her sensibilities.



“I like you better when you’re nice and smiling, Kin-chan,” said Koutarou.

“I’ll try to be like that then.”

“But I know you get tunnel vision when you really set your heart on something.”

“Please stop. It sounds like you’re saying I’m good at holding a grudge.”

“Ahahaha!”

By the time Koutarou was laughing, Kotori was back to her usual nice, smiling self.

Thanks, Kou! I knew you would be able to do something!

Kenji pressed his hands together in a gesture of gratitude for his best friend. Kiriha was the only one who noticed, but after thoughtfully tilting her head to the side, she decided not to say anything.

“Heehee,” Nalfa giggled as she watched over her best friend.

“What is it, Nal-chan?” Kotori asked, taking notice now that she was back to normal.

“I was just thinking that you and Koutarou-sama really are like brother and sister.”

Nalfa had an older brother of her own, and while they butted heads from time to time, they generally got along well and cared deeply for one another. When she looked at Kotori and Koutarou, she could tell they had a similar kind of relationship.

“She recently decided that we *are* brother and sister, after all,” Koutarou replied.

Kotori nodded vigorously in agreement. Even if she wanted Kenji out of her life, Koutarou was still near and dear to her heart. She’d been looking up to him as her real brother ever since, which was a reassuring change of pace to her.

“Kotoriiii!”

Kenji, meanwhile, felt like he’d been disowned. Fearing he’d lost his little sister for good, he let out a cry of despair that struck anguish in the hearts of all

who heard it. The entire Corona House crew, however, knew that Kenji was only reaping what he'd sown.

"Anyway, have you finished up everything you need to for the trip, Mackenzie?" Koutarou asked as though nothing were wrong.

"Do I really have to go...?" Kenji, the victim of a merciless mental beatdown, looked up at Koutarou with hollow eyes. He looked like nothing mattered to him anymore.

"It's that bystander mentality of yours that gets Kin-chan so worked up, man. You're more important than you think."

"Only because you suddenly became some legendary hero out of nowhere. So much has happened in the past six months that I can't keep up."

Koutarou couldn't argue there. Kenji was being dragged into something that had nothing to do with him. Moreover, the recent whirlwind of events would have left anyone reeling. Putting his life on the line for an alien he'd befriended was one thing to Kenji, but who could just up and accept that their childhood friend was an intergalactic hero? Unlike Koutarou and the girls who'd come to terms with it gradually over time, Kenji had been forced to confront it most abruptly.

"And now we're going to Forthorthe in a UFO? I honestly can't tell what's real anymore..."

"Resistance is futile. We will take you with us by force if necessary," Theia informed him.

"That's kidnapping!" Kenji protested.

"Oooh, it's like a real alien abduction!" Sanae cooed.

The young psychic's eyes were sparkling, as were the eyes of the magical girl sitting next to her. In movies and on TV, aliens were always whisking humans away on UFOs. And though Theia had no interest in studying Kenji for science, in truth, she *was* threatening to commit an abduction. Sanae and Yurika both loved that sort of thing.

"Any thoughts on cattle mutilation?" Sanae asked eagerly.

“You sure know about the most useless things, don’t you?” Koutarou asked in turn.

“Eeheehee.”

Sanae wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but she had an uncanny memory for anything and everything occult.

“Say, on the subject of people suddenly becoming heroes,” began Theia, “I have a feeling Snoozy’s going to be an overnight sensation in Forthorthe.”

“Meow?” Snoozy looked over at Theia when he heard his name, cocking his head in puzzlement. He couldn’t yet understand human language in full.

“Why?” Koutarou also cocked his head, although in his case, it was because he *could* understand Theia.

“Snoozy is in some of Nalfa’s videos, you know? Forthorthe is quite interested in this adorable little creature.”

Most Forthorthians wanted to know more about Earth, including the animals that lived there. It was the first alien planet they’d encountered in some time. Moreover, it was the Blue Knight’s home planet.

“There are cats in Forthorthe, aren’t there?” Koutarou asked.

“Yes, but not with this sort of coloration. Not to mention that he lives with you,” replied Theia.

“So *that’s* the deal... You better prepare yourself for when we arrive in Forthorthe, little guy.”

“Meow?”

“They’ll make a big deal out of anything.”

“Meow!”

Snoozy, interpreting Koutarou’s attention as an invitation to play, gingerly grabbed and released his finger. Asking people to play like this was Snoozy’s specialty, and he got exactly what he was hoping for as Koutarou reached for him and began petting him.

“Are you having Satomi-kun play with you, Snoozy? Lucky you.”

“Mrrrow!”

When he heard Maki’s voice, Snoozy literally ran up and down the wall back and forth between her and Koutarou. His owner was special to him, and he was naturally more energetic when she was around. Seeing this, Nalfa couldn’t help reaching for her camera.

“Master, Her Majesty is quite fond of cats as well,” Ruth informed Koutarou.

“So Elle’s a cat person, huh? It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her...”

At the mention of Elfaria, Koutarou’s thoughts turned to the faraway empress. Sensing that he’d lost Koutarou’s attention, Snoozy scratched at his lap.

“Okay, okay, let’s play more.”

“Meow!”

Now that Koutarou was paying attention to him again, Snoozy began to rub up against his leg. Theia happily watched over the two of them, confident in her assessment. Snoozy would *definitely* be a star in Forthorthe. More than Koutarou and Snoozy, however, she was interested in Koutarou and Elfaria.

“Despite what you say, are you looking forward to seeing my mother again?”

“She can be a handful, but we are friends after all. I still remember how shocked I was to come back to this day and age only to find out she’d assumed the throne.”

“Even though I’d already told you my mother was empress?”

“I know you told me that, but hearing your mother is empress and knowing Elle—that strange, funny girl—became empress are two totally different things. I mean, I’m over it now, but still.”

Just like how Kenji had trouble seeing Koutarou as a hero, Koutarou had had trouble coming to see Elfaria as a ruler. Fortunately it hadn’t posed much of an issue while she was removed from her position during the coup, but he’d struggled to see the odd girl he’d met twenty years in the past as the sovereign of a galactic empire. His impression of her back then colored how he treated her now.

Thinking this over, Koutarou silently took a sip of tea and stared into his cup. The unique aroma was unmistakable—it was Forthorthian Rubustori tea. The Rubustori plant had previously been believed to be extinct, but just over a decade ago, it reappeared on the market and was now a standard variety of black tea in Forthorthe. It was also Elfaria’s personal favorite.

“Koutarou-sama, is there something wrong with the tea?” Nalfa asked, concerned when she saw Koutarou staring at his cup. She’d brewed the tea herself, so she was afraid that she’d screwed it up.

Koutarou shook his head with a smile. “Just the opposite. It’s difficult to make good Rubustori tea, but this is delicious. I’m impressed.”

“Oh, good. I actually practiced a lot.”

“I see. No wonder.”

“Isn’t that great, Nal-chan? All that tea we drank together was worth it!” Kotori jumped in, cheering on her best friend.

“Yes!”

Nalfa burst into a smile, relieved and overjoyed. She knew that Koutarou liked Rubustori tea, so she’d practiced especially hard to perfect making it. She and Kotori had shared dozens of cups before coming up with something satisfactory.

“Hmm... Yeah, let’s do that,” Koutarou mumbled to himself.

“Koutarou-sama?”

“I’ve decided to go do a little shopping myself.”

“I see.”

Indeed, Koutarou realized that he still had something to do before the trip. It was nothing big, but he was confident it’d be worth it.

With the voyage to Forthorthe right around the corner, Theia, Maki and Harumi met up one sunny day to finish their shopping. Rather than the long-established stores of the shopping street they frequented on a regular basis, they were headed to the newer specialty boutiques by the station.

“What are you looking for today, Theia-san?” asked Maki.

“Meow?” echoed Snoozy.

The ever-serious Maki tended to be quite formal with Theia. Snoozy, however, treated the princess just like everyone else.

“I was thinking of getting some things for my bike,” Theia, walking at the head of the group, turned to reply.

Hearing this, Harumi cocked her head. “But Forthorthe has bikes too, doesn’t it?”

“It does, but they don’t use the same parts.”

“Ah, so you’ll be taking your bike with you.”

Harumi now nodded in understanding. Theia wanted to take her Japanese-made bike back to Forthorthe, so in order to keep it in good condition, she’d also need to take the tools, parts, and supplies to service and maintain it while they were away.

“I’m mostly after tubes for the tires, as well as chains, brakes, and transmission wires. The parts that get the most use wear out the fastest.”

“Yes, it would be terrible if you brought your bike with you only for the chain to fall apart after a few days.”

“Meow!”

Maki also nodded in understanding. Snoozy didn’t understand what they were talking about, but he offered his input all the same.

The bicycle store by the station was rather large and stocked a variety of parts and supplies for people who liked to service their own bikes. They were arranged based on function, but since Harumi knew very little about bikes, she scarcely knew what anything was for except the tire tubes.

“What is this?” she muttered, picking up a small plastic bag that was on display next to the tires. Inside was a cylindrical metallic rod, a plastic cap made to go on it, and a piece of rubber. She couldn’t even imagine what they were for.

“Ah, that’s a valve to prevent the air in the tire from leaking back out,” replied Maki, peering at what Harumi was holding.

Harumi smiled in return. “Now that you mention it, I think I’ve seen this twisty bit on bike tires before when putting air into them.”

“You’ve pumped your tires before?”

“Ahahaha, yes.”

Even if they used them every day, most girls weren’t savvy about the mechanics of bikes and their various parts. Maki had had to replace a leaky tire valve herself before, so that was the extent of her own personal knowledge. The intricacies and specifics of the machine were largely the interest of more serious sportsmen, so it was no surprise that Theia was the only one of the Corona House crew who was personally invested in the subject. Since the moment the girls had entered the store, her glittering eyes had been darting from shelf to shelf.

“Now, one thing I do understand is these baskets,” said Harumi. “I would pick the cutest one for my bike.”

The baskets were much more within Harumi’s comfort zone, and there was a wide selection to choose from. Unfortunately, none of them were cute enough to suit Harumi’s tastes, so she didn’t end up purchasing one for herself.

“You should pick your sporting goods like you would any equipment,” Theia announced as she returned to the group. “Practical all-weather designs are focused on durability and performance over looks.”

“I guess you *would* have to use your basket in the rain and on potentially rough terrain,” Harumi mused.

“Indeed.”

They were getting more aesthetically pleasing over time, but since most baskets were designed for mountain bikes and road racers, they rarely came in flashy styles. That’s why Harumi couldn’t find one she liked.

“Welcome back, Theia-san. Are you already done?” Maki guessed as she glanced at Theia’s shopping basket, which was already full of parts.

“No, I still have some more to get,” she replied.

Theia hadn't come back because she was done. She'd come to get a second basket.

Theia ran this way and that all over the store but eventually came to an abrupt halt. When they saw the princess staring at something, Harumi and Maki walked over to figure out what.

“HMMMMM...”

Theia was standing in front of a shelf, her arms folded and her narrowed eyes fixed on the products. She was currently scrutinizing bike seats.

“Is something the matter, Theiamillis-san?” Harumi inquired.

“Putting on airs has backfired on me...” Theia muttered.

“Putting on airs?” Maki echoed.

At that, Harumi and Maki exchanged looks. When they did, Theia reluctantly explained, “Simply put... when I was choosing the body for my bike, I picked a larger frame. I couldn't bring myself to buy a child-sized one.”

Given Theia's stature, child-sized parts were a much better fit for her. She was too prideful to accept that, however, and had insisted on getting the smallest adult parts available instead.

“Loath as I am to admit it, my legs are short. I need the saddle to be as low-profile as possible so I can reach the ground.”

With her current bike build, even with the saddle lowered to its minimum height, she could just barely reach the ground with her toes. That was what she meant when she said putting on airs had backfired.

“The thing is, there aren't that many low-profile designs. The limited selection is problematic. Should I just stick it out with what I have or try to find something lower? I'm stuck, like Harumi was with the baskets earlier.”

“Ah, so that's your dilemma. I wasn't sure what was happening when you suddenly stopped, but I'm glad it wasn't anything important,” Harumi said in relief.

Theia, meanwhile, was pouting. “This *is* important. The length of my legs is a major issue for me.”

“They’re pretty long for your height, Theiamillis-san,” Harumi offered.

“I’m still short,” Theia rebutted.

Theia’s problem was indeed her height. The people around her found it cute, but she considered it a most grievous condition.

“I wish I were your height,” said Maki, much to everyone’s surprise. She rarely voiced a contrary opinion about anything.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Theia argued. “You have no idea what it feels like for someone to tell you the child size is *just perfect* for you!”

“Maybe not, but you’re the only one of us that Satomi-kun can carry so easily.”

It was a different story with the assistance of powered armor, but lifting a person was strenuous labor. Nevertheless, Koutarou could carry someone of Theia’s stature with relative ease. Maki had always been a little jealous of that.

“I bet it feels amazing when he wraps his arms around you in a hug too,” Maki added.

She was jealous of that too. She’d already matured into a grown woman, so she’d never get to experience it for herself. She would have loved to be Theia’s size.

“When he... What...” Theia quietly muttered and then fell silent. As the seconds ticked by, her face turned more and more red. She knew exactly what Maki was talking about. “I-I can’t deny it...”

“I thought so.” Maki smiled, although her face was a little red too. She was imagining Koutarou embracing a more petite version of herself.

Meanwhile, Harumi was pouting. “It is unfair that you’re the only one, Theiamillis-san...”

Theia had a very physical way of expressing her feelings for Koutarou. If she couldn’t see him for a while, she would tackle him the next time they met. And when they fought, she would go all out against him. Even when waking up

Koutarou in the morning, she wouldn't hesitate to use a body press on him. In other words, she had physical contact with Koutarou on an almost daily basis. Behaving that way was beyond the painfully shy Harumi, so she, too, was a little jealous.

After finishing up at the bike store, a certain awkwardness hung over the three girls. They were of a sensitive age, after all. However, by the time they'd finished lunch, everything was back to normal between them.

"You said you wanted to buy clothes, right?" asked Theia.

"Yes," replied Harumi. "Clothes, accessories, and some cosmetics."

Now that they'd wrapped up Theia's shopping, they'd be moving on to Harumi's. Her primary goal was filling out her wardrobe, so she wanted to pick up several pieces.

"But you always seem so fashionable to me already, Sakuraba-san," said Maki.

Maki didn't think Harumi's current style was lacking in any way. She always wore modest but refined clothes. Of the nine girls, her tastes were the most impeccable, followed by the more adult Kiriha and the trendier Shizuka. Maki certainly didn't think Harumi's wardrobe needed updating. The people of Forthorthe didn't know what Harumi normally wore, so there was no reason for her to feel she needed new clothes either. If anyone, Maki thought Yurika was in the direst need of some fashion help.

"We are going to a different planet with a different culture, and the impression we make will reflect on both Earth and Japan. As the oldest among us, I at least need to dress properly," Harumi explained.

Indeed, Harumi was concerned about presenting herself as a representative of Earth. In other words, she wanted something nice to wear in more formal situations. As the oldest of the group, she wanted to set the best example.

"Leave it to Harumi to be so on top of things. No one else has said anything about that," remarked Theia.

"But Sakuraba-san, isn't your Satomi knights' uniform enough for formal

occasions?” asked Maki. As an official band of knights, the Satomi knights indeed had their own uniform, and Maki felt that would be more than appropriate.

“They’re Forthorthian in style, and they’re a little too stiff. I want something more fitting of a civilian,” Harumi explained. She was concerned that a military uniform would be too much for, say, greeting the hotel employees wherever they’d be staying. Her everyday wear was a little too casual for that, however, so she wanted to find a good compromise.

“I see... Come to think of it, you’re right about that,” said Theia.

“Although I would like some regular clothes too,” admitted Harumi.

“In that case, wouldn’t it have been better to invite Satomi-kun along?” asked Maki. The girls would constantly be by Koutarou’s side in Forthorthe, so she thought it would be best to pick something that was to his tastes.

However, Harumi panicked and shook her head. “N-No, absolutely not!”

“Why not?”

“Th-That’s...” Harumi faltered, her face beet red. Seeing her like this, Theia and Maki glanced at each other with puzzled expressions. Resigned, Harumi walked over to them and whispered something into their ears.

“...You’ve gained weight?!”

“Theiamillis-san, shush!”



“S-Sorry.”

“My figure hasn’t changed, but for some reason, I have gotten a little heavier...”

“Ah, so that’s what’s going on,” Maki remarked with a sage nod and a slight smile.

“What do you mean?” Harumi asked.

“You’ve always had a weak constitution, haven’t you, Sakuraba-san? But now you’re exercising and eating more, so you’re putting on muscle,” Maki explained.

“Muscles are heavier than fat, so that would explain the additional weight without any change to your waistline,” Theia added. She knew as much thanks to her experience with athletics. She was generally heavier than other girls of the same size and stature.

“I actually think my waist has gotten slimmer too.”

“Then it really must have been a shock to see that number,” said Maki.

Harumi nodded in embarrassment. Even though gaining weight when she gained muscle made sense to her, it was still quite a blow to see it on the scale. And since her size and weight were inevitable topics when shopping for new clothes, she’d known ahead of time that she couldn’t bear to have Koutarou around for that conversation.

“I can’t imagine that Koutarou would care, though,” argued Theia.

“He *is* always telling you to put on more weight, Sakuraba-san,” agreed Maki.

“Ahaha... I must say I do feel a little healthier,” admitted Harumi.

Without Koutarou present, Harumi spent the afternoon consulting Maki and Theia instead. She methodically picked out several outfits for a variety of occasions, including official gatherings, meetings, and simply going out into the city.

“Having Sakuraba-san around at times like this is great,” remarked Maki.

“She’s a great coordinator. Although it pains me to say, she makes for a better leader than me.”

“Please don’t put me on a pedestal like that. I’m just a normal university student, not to mention... it makes it harder to go to my next destination.”

“Your next destination?” Maki asked.

The princess and the magical girl exchanged looks again. By this point, they’d already finished buying clothes. Harumi had an outfit for every situation she could think of, so there shouldn’t have been anywhere else to go.

“Th-This way...” Her face beet red once more, Harumi guided the two girls to a large sales area on the other side of the store.

“I totally get it now, Harumi!” exclaimed Theia. Once they arrived, she immediately understood why *this* was her final destination.

“Indeed, you certainly couldn’t have brought Satomi-kun here,” agreed Maki. A girl’s weight and figure mattered more in this part of the store than any other, for it sold the most intimate clothing imaginable.

“I-I want you to be honest... Um, what kind of underwear are you wearing? And I’m not just asking about now, but in the future too.”

Indeed, Harumi had brought the girls to the undergarments section. Choosing new underwear was her greatest dilemma. It was why she’d really brought the other girls along today.

“I want to excite Satomi-kun, but I don’t want something so extreme that he’ll think I’m a pervert,” volunteered Maki.

Maki fell a bit on the conservative side. If the opportunity arose, she wanted to wear something that Koutarou would like. But at the same time, she was such a serious girl that something too over the top would backfire. She thus believed a certain amount of restraint was necessary.

“You don’t have to leave everything up to him!” Theia insisted. “If you stay on the offensive, your underwear won’t matter. As they say, the best defense is a good offense!”

That was Theia’s philosophy. She always wanted to make the first move, even

in relationships. Although she wanted to be attacked herself at times, she generally preferred to be the aggressor. She thus believed that underwear—a passive piece of armor—wasn't all that important.

“That's a tactic only you and Kiriha-san could use!” Harumi protested. As a defensive player herself and a believer in old-fashioned romance, taking the initiative was beyond her. “It's too much for me!”

“Then in my case, I suppose I'll be going for something really extreme,” said Theia.

“You want to come on strong, Theia-san?” Maki asked.

“Er, well, you could say that. Going on the defensive doesn't suit me.”

“So Maki-san believes in moderation, and Theiamillis-san believes in going on the attack...” Harumi muttered.

With this, she stopped to think for a moment. She was naturally partial to Maki's theory, but if Maki were absolutely right, Harumi also felt that she'd already be closer with Koutarou than she currently was. That being the case, going on the offensive seemed like a good idea—although not to the extreme that Theia suggested.

“But you're not really ready to let him see you in your underwear yet, are you?” Theia couldn't help asking.

“Well, no... but...”

“Then why not go with something daring?”

“Because Kiriha-san said that accidents can happen at any time!”

Harumi wanted to ensure she was decently dressed at all times. As the oldest of the group, she'd be interacting with all sorts of people in Forthorthe. She couldn't just wear what Koutarou would like. Moreover, she had no intention of showing off her underwear of her own accord. She was only concerned about being prepared for accidents. Like Kiriha had said at the beach, they were always a possibility. As a romantic, she'd objected to the notion at first... but now that she was thinking about it calmly, perhaps there *was* something more she could do than simply waiting for Koutarou.

“Accidents, you say?” mused Theia. The first thing that came to mind for her was wrestling with Koutarou. There’d been times when her clothes had gotten disheveled or tugged loose. If something were to slip off, some daring underwear might be necessary after all.

“An accident with Satomi-kun...” Maki’s mind, meanwhile, immediately went to giving Snoozy a bath. Whenever she did that, her clothes would get wet and see-through. If Koutarou happened upon her in such a state, he would get a glimpse of her underwear, so she began considering exactly what he’d see.

“Harumi, I will buy underwear too!” exclaimed Theia.

“Me too! Help me out, Sakuraba-san!” exclaimed Maki.

As an alien, Theia wasn’t entirely sure what kind of underwear Koutarou might like. Similarly, Maki had an ascetic upbringing and wasn’t up to date with Japan’s fashion. They both wanted to upgrade their armor, and they saw Harumi as the perfect guru in that department. Playing defense was her specialty, after all.

Many commercial establishments in Japan were gradually beginning to accept pets in stores, but the bicycle shop and clothing boutiques the girls had visited weren’t on the list. Pets in such stores would be problematic, so Snoozy had had to wait outside for the girls until they were done.

“Meow.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Snoozy.”

“Meow!” Snoozy’s carrier was outfitted with hover thrusters, optical camouflage, air conditioning, and an automatic food dispenser courtesy of Clan and Ruth. To a cat, however, a cage was still a cage, and Snoozy accordingly voiced his complaints.

“You can go into the next store, okay?”

“Meow?”

“Heehee, that’s right. We’re shopping for you next.”

The final stop on the girls’ shopping trip was the pet store. Clan and Ruth had

told Maki they'd be able to synthesize anything she might need on the trip, but that would take time, so Maki wanted to pick up everything she'd need in the immediate future while she had the chance.

"A pet shop, huh? I've never been to one, even in Forthorthe." Theia was excited. This was her first ever trip to a pet store. She was looking forward to seeing what kind of place it was and what they sold.

Seeing Theia's enthusiasm, Harumi grew curious. Harumi didn't have a pet herself, but she'd still been to a pet store to see the animals before. Theia had apparently never done such a thing. "Is that because, as a princess, you always had access to things you needed without shopping for them?"

"Indeed. Ruth or my attendants would bring me anything immediately. It wasn't until I came here that I had the experience of shopping for myself."

Theia's status was the real reason she hadn't been to a pet store before. As an imperial princess, she couldn't simply go out shopping whenever she pleased. Instead, she'd had attendants to bring her things, so the very act of shopping had been foreign to Theia before coming to Earth. She'd since been to bike shops and clothing boutiques, but never a pet store. And as soon as the girls crossed the threshold, she took off in excitement.

"Look at all the creatures!"

The pet store sold animals in addition to supplies. There were dogs, cats, birds, fish, and even reptiles. It was like a tiny zoo, and Theia was like a child on her first visit. She gleefully walked up and down the rows of cages and tanks.

Maki watched her with a smile. "Goodness, Theia-san. Heehee."

"Meow!" Snoozy was also excited at the sight of other animals, though not as much as Theia. Since pets were allowed in the pet store, he'd actually been several times already.

"Maki-san, please go ahead and buy whatever you need. I will look after Theiamillis-san," Harumi offered.

"Thank you very much, Sakuraba-san. Let's go, Snoozy."

"Meow!"

Harumi chased after Theia, and Maki took Snoozy deeper into the store. The animals for sale were up front in order to catch shoppers' eyes. They also enjoyed the bright environment, although there were certain species kept in darker areas of the store. Maki passed them all as she made her way to the back, where pet supplies were housed.

"Mrrreow!" Upon spotting a fish tank, Snoozy began scratching at it when they walked by. As a cat, he was quite interested in fish.

"Stop that, Snoozy. These fish aren't for eating."

"Meow..."

"No means no, even if you look at me like that."

Snoozy desperately wanted the fish in the tank, and while he *did* tug at Maki's heartstrings when he looked at her so sadly, she was already here for his sake. She remained resolute and continued her journey to the pet supplies in the back of the store.

"Let's see... First up is food."

Maki pushed a cart toward the shelves of pet chow. There were all kinds depending on the breed, age, and dietary needs. Picking out the right one could be time consuming, but fortunately, Maki was a frequent shopper here. She knew exactly where to find the food for kittens.

"Snoozy, how much do you want?"

"Meow."

"A lot? Okay, then that's what we'll get."

Maki went along with Snoozy's suggestion and put several bags of the usual kibble in the cart. She was a specialist in indigo magic, but she could detect especially strong desires even without the use of spells. She could tell that Snoozy wanted lots and lots of food. Similarly, she could also convey simple ideas to Snoozy. So while she appeared to be talking to herself, she was having an actual conversation with the cat.

"And catnip?"

"Meow!!!"

“Okay, okay, but only one bag.”

“Mrow!”

Maki loaded the cart as they chatted away. They had plenty to buy, so this went on for quite some time. Anyone who saw the two of them couldn’t help thinking...

“Maki, you are almost like a mother.” Theia was the first to say it out loud when she saw them. She was on cloud nine after getting her fill of looking at all the animals.

“Really? That makes me happy to hear,” Maki replied with a smile. She took it as the highest grade of compliment. “I couldn’t even imagine keeping a cat in the past.”

After being sold to a slaver and brought up in a militaristic society, Maki was naturally distrustful—even of animals. The idea of raising one herself had never even crossed her mind back then, so being described as motherly now meant a lot to her. She was truly growing out of the shackles of her past. It was wonderful news to her ears.

“You are doing a great job as Snoozy’s mother,” Harumi agreed. She’d gotten the same impression as Theia. Maki and Snoozy radiated love and care for one another, and that was something Harumi prized highly.

“A mother, huh? I wonder if I’ll be a real one someday,” Maki mused.

“You will. I’m sure of it,” Harumi assured her.

“I suppose that’ll have to wait until Satomi-kun makes up his mind.”

“Yes... I suppose it will, teehee.”

If Maki was going to have a child, she wanted it to be with Koutarou. Given how serious he was, however, that potential future was still a long way off.

“I guess you’ll have to wait a while before you meet my baby, Snoozy,” lamented Maki.

“Meow.”

“Until then, you’ll have to be our baby instead,” said Theia.

“Ahaha, that sounds good.”

“Meow!”

“It seems Snoozy is fine with that too.”

The girls knew they were pressuring their beloved to make an impossible choice, so they were all willing to wait as long as it took for him to give in. Snoozy would be with them until that day, and most likely well after. He’d made his decision far faster than Koutarou.

Sanae could act as two people by separating part of her soul from her body, so with the arrival of Sanae-nee from another world, there were effectively three Sanaes. This had caused some confusion initially, but everyone had quickly gotten over it—except for Sanae-chan.

“I expected there to be more of a reaction to there being three of us!” she insisted, folding her arms from where she was astrally projecting beside her body. The gesture was largely for dramatic effect, however; she wasn’t actually angry.

Knowing that, Shizuka replied with a slightly exasperated smile, “Well, there were already two of you... Adding one more to the mix isn’t *that* surprising.”

Sanae-chan had joined the Corona House crew as a ghost, and they’d later collected Sanae-san—her physical body. It had been over a year since then so everyone had, in fact, already gotten used to the idea of there being multiple Sanaes. No one was really fazed by adding another.

“So you’re all tired of me? Next, you’ll be getting rid of me...” Sanae-nee lamented, wiping an imaginary tear from her eye. She had the same penchant for theatrics that Sanae did, which only put a further damper on the mood. The Sanaes were the only ones who didn’t seem to notice this.

“Come on. You haven’t even had a boyfriend yet,” interjected Sanae-san. Having grown up normally, she was the most down-to-earth of the three Sanaes.

“That’s because he won’t go that far,” Shizuka said bitterly.

They behaved more like lovers than actual lovers did, but the person they cared for was being very stubborn. An ironclad will was keeping his common sense and sincerity safe. They were both troubled and happy by that. It made them understand that they were being treasured.

“Don’t worry. Even the most impregnable dams eventually spring leaks,” Sanae-chan reassured her other selves.

“Hopefully three of us will mean three times the pressure,” said Sanae-nee.

“I just hope we’re not a burden...” fretted Sanae-san.

The Sanaes and Shizuka were currently on their way to visit Shizuka’s late parents at the cemetery on a hill at the edge of the city. The somber reason for their trip was part of the reason the Sanaes were making such a commotion. They wanted to lift Shizuka’s spirits a little.

“Thanks, you three,” she murmured.

“Hmm? What for?” Sanae-chan asked.

“I wonder... Heehee.”

Shizuka thought it would be uncouth *not* to thank them, but she also thought it would be uncouth to bring it up directly. In the end, she settled for being vague.

It had been a while since Shizuka’s last visit, so the Kasagi family grave was a little dirty. Weeds had sprouted up around it, leaves had gathered on top of it, and it was covered in a fine layer of dust. The girls’ first job was thus cleaning it up before paying their respects.

“Let’s do this! Get to work, ladies!” Sanae-chan ordered.

“That’s unfair... This is why you left our body, isn’t it?” Sanae-san asked.

“That’s just a coincidence.”

“Sanae-san is right. This is unfair,” Sanae-nee cut in. “You’re one of us, so you’re going to work with us.”

Shizuka, Sanae-san, and Sanae Onee-chan were presently the only ones

cleaning. Sanae-chan was projecting and thus had no physical body to work with. All she'd done to help was levitate over a bucket of water. Her other two selves were none too pleased with her.

"Sorry, but psychic powers aren't suited for delicate work," she informed them.

"You can do it if you try! It's a matter of guts!" Sanae-nee argued.

"She's right, Sanae-chan! You're always demanding that I do reckless things," Sanae-san added.

"Okay, okay... Jeez."

Upon being hounded by her other selves, Sanae-chan got to work. She didn't put up too much of a fight either. This place was precious to a dear friend of hers, after all.

"I appreciate all the help, everyone," said Shizuka.

"Don't sweat it," replied Sanae-nee. "This is your family grave, so we'll treat it like our own."

"Indeed," threw in Sanae-san. "You're always doing so much for us, this is the least we could do for you."

"Are you two acting like super good girls just to get back at me?" asked Sanae-chan.

"You'd do the same if our positions were reversed, wouldn't you?"

"Well, yeah."

Tending to a grave was ordinarily gloomy work, but thanks to the Sanaes, the mood was bright and cheerful. They might have caused a nuisance for other visitors, but thankfully, the girls were the only ones around today. Perhaps the departed resting there might find them noisy, but Shizuka was fine with that. The Sanaes could hear the voices of the dead, so she was sure they'd speak up if it was really too much trouble.

Besides, I'm sure Mom and Dad prefer it this way...

Shizuka thought that it was best that they carried on like normal rather than

being cautiously reserved. She wanted her parents to see what great friends she had. Once the cleaning was done, Shizuka turned to the gravestone and addressed them.

“Mom, Dad, I’m sorry I haven’t been to visit in so long. I brought the Sanaes with me today.”

In spite of the situation, the tone of her voice wasn’t dark at all. The Sanaes had indeed lifted her spirits. Moreover, thanks to them, Shizuka knew that death wasn’t the end.

“Ma’am, sir, your daughter means the world to us,” said Sanae-nee. As the oldest of the group, she spoke respectfully... yet what she said sounded off. That wasn’t typically how one would greet a friend’s parents.

“Heh! You sound like you’re going to ask for her hand in marriage, Onee-chan,” teased Sanae-chan.

“Shush! This is important, so don’t play around,” Sanae-san scolded her. She was concerned about the propriety of it all.



Shizuka, meanwhile, didn't seem to care. "Oh, it's fine," she said. "Anyway, Mom and Dad, we'll be going back to Forthorthe soon. That's where Theia-chan and the other aliens are from."

Shizuka had come to see her parents today because it had been ages since her last visit. She wanted to let them know she'd be leaving, and she also wanted to introduce the Sanaes. So while the visit was important, it wasn't strictly serious.

"I'll be watching over your daughter. I swear to take good care of her."

"See? It totally sounds like you're going to marry her."

"Please, you two!"

"What's the harm? Her parents look like they're having fun."

That was the reason the Sanaes were so carefree. With their psychic powers, they could see Shizuka's parents watching over them.

"Ah, you can see them again?"

Sanae had seen Shizuka's parents watching over her before, which made Shizuka very happy. That was how she'd learned that death really wasn't the end.

"Yeah, I can see them right now," Sanae-chan told her. "This might sound funny, but they look very bright and full of energy. Do you want to see for yourself?"

"You can do that for me?!"

"Hmm, hang on. I think I just need to do this... Hyah!"

Thanks to the recent addition of the sword-shaped crest on her forehead, Sanae could now show Shizuka her parents by sharing her spiritual energy with her. The crest was a sign of their contract with Signaltin, and it connected them in new and special ways. Effectively, she could let Shizuka use her spirit sight temporarily.

"Mom! Dad! They're really faint, but I can see them!"

Indeed, Shizuka could now see her parents. Their forms were hazy, but she

could feel their presence, and that was enough for her. The moment she could sense them near, tears welled in her eyes.

“I’m sorry they’re hard to see, this is the limit of our maiden power... I mean, of our psychic abilities,” Sanae-nee apologized.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Shizuka asked.

“Um, you can really only see ghosts when they have lingering regret attaching them to this world. Your parents are a little worried about you, but for the most part, they know you’re happy and doing well.”

The spirits of the departed remained attached to the material world by their regrets. For Shizuka’s parents, their biggest regret was having to leave their daughter alone. But seeing how happy and healthy she was now, that regret was waning and so was their connection to the world. That was why they looked so hazy to her.

“So, ideally, I wouldn’t be able to see them at all?”

“Yep. Although that can be pretty sad.”

The day Shizuka’s parents stopped worrying about her entirely, they would disappear from this world completely. They would finally move on. And although it was poignant, it was the natural order of things.

“Then I think that would be for the best,” said Shizuka. “Even if I can’t see them, I’ll just have to believe that they’re happy.”

Shizuka had no idea what the afterlife was like. Perhaps her parents would live happily in heaven, or perhaps they’d be reborn. Either way, she didn’t want to hold them back any longer than she should. She knew she couldn’t rely on her late parents forever.

“You’re amazing, Shizuka. You’re so strong. But I think you’re right.”

Sanae agreed with her—that moving on would be for the best for them. Sanae personally would have wanted her parents to stay with her forever, but Shizuka did make a good point. Sanae deeply respected her for that.

“In that case, I’ll be doing my best, Mom and Dad!” Shizuka cried.

“Next, she’ll be back to say she’s engaged,” Sanae-nee added.

“That’s enough of that!” Sanae-san fussed.

“I dunno,” Sanae-chan replied. “She might not be too far off.”

“W-Well, we *are* talking about Shizuka-san’s happiness, so I guess it’s all right...”

Shizuka was determined to live her life to the fullest so that her parents wouldn’t worry—and it would only be better if she did return one day with news of marriage for them. That way, she could send them off with a smile.

Following the graveside visit, Shizuka and the Sanaes made their way to the shopping street. They were headed to a specialty store that sold sweets and traditional snacks like rice crackers and manju. Their second task for the day was to buy mass quantities of refreshments. Since Forthorthe didn’t have any of the girls’ favorites, this was an especially important job.

“Your spending limit is 500 yen! Bananas don’t count!” Sanae-nee instructed like a teacher on a school field trip.

“Everything on this list will be *well* over 500 yen. Should we really be buying so much?” Sanae-san asked timidly.

The original Corona House crew plus Nalfa, Kotori, and Kenji made for a total of thirteen people. The shopping list of everyone’s must-buy snacks was several pages long. If Shizuka and the Sanaes really bought it all, room 106 would be flooded with snacks.

“It’ll be fine!” Sanae-chan assured her.

“We’ve already talked logistics with Clan-san and Ruth-san,” Shizuka added.

Fortunately, there was plenty of space to store things on the spaceship. Clan’s Hazy Moon had so much cargo capacity that they could have loaded the entire store into the bay without putting a dent in it. It didn’t realistically matter how long the girls’ list was.

“Oh?” Sanae-nee piped up as she happened to glance inside a store they were passing. “Isn’t that Koutarou?”

“I think that’s... the tea shop,” said Sanae-san, glancing at the store sign.

“Heeey, Koutaroooouuuuu!” called Sanae-chan. Unlike her other self, once she’d spotted Koutarou, she wasted no time flying over to him.

“Hey, you guys,” he said.

“Whatcha doing?” Sanae-chan asked him.

“Grabbing some tea and coffee.”

“Ah, of course. Gotta get the stuff you like, right?”

“Yeah. They make good gifts too, you know?”

“How polite of you to consider such things, Koutarou,” threw in Sanae-nee, nodding her head.

Koutarou furrowed his brow at this. “I’ve always been particular about manners. I used to do sports.”

“Harumi’s also making sure she’s prepared for all sorts of formalities—I’m not sure sports has anything to do with it.”

“Unlike me, Sakuraba-senpai didn’t need to have etiquette drilled into her.”

Koutarou grabbed hold of Sanae-nee’s face and squished her cheeks between his hands. That seemed to be exactly what she wanted, as she put up no resistance whatsoever.

“You should learn some manners too,” he said, turning to look at Sanae-chan.

“Ahahaha, yeah, right,” she replied.

“Hmm?”

As Koutarou continued to squish Sanae-nee’s cheeks, he couldn’t help noticing Sanae-san squirming at the back of the group. It wasn’t until he watched her closely that he noticed she wasn’t just squirming—she was emphatically pointing at Shizuka and trying to tell him something.

Is something the matter with Landlord-san...?

Shizuka was smiling as she watched Koutarou and Sanae-nee, but Sanae-san’s apparent desperation told Koutarou that there was more to it. He took a moment to ponder what.

“Okay, that’s enough,” he said.

“Whaaat?” Sanae-nee protested.

“I have important stuff to do.”

“What could be more important than showing me affection?!”

Once he’d made up his mind, Koutarou released Sanae-nee. She looked displeased, like she wanted him to continue. When she saw him walk over to Shizuka, however, her displeasure vanished.

When Koutarou reached Shizuka, he looked her up and down. “Hmm...”

“Satomi-kun?”

“I wonder if this is right...”

There, Koutarou tilted his head and embraced her.

“Eek!” Taken by surprise, she yelped a little. “Huh? What? Satomi-kun?!”

“And around we go.”

With his arms still around Shizuka, Koutarou began to spin. It was the sort of thing a parent might do to humor their child, but he and Shizuka were both teenagers. They looked more like a couple playing around.

Thinking about it, Landlord-san just came back from visiting her parents’ grave. I should be especially considerate.

Shizuka was a bastion of strength and stability (except when it came to her weight), but even she needed a tender touch every now and then. Koutarou wanted to give her that.

I’ll need to thank Sanae-san later.

He’d only picked up on it because of the squirming Sanae-san. If he thanked her now, however, Shizuka would catch on. He knew he’d have to do it privately some other time.

“Okay, that’s enough.”

After a few whirls, Koutarou set Shizuka down. The unexpected spinning left her a little dizzy, so she clung to him for a moment even after her feet touched

the ground. She closed her eyes and whispered, “Satomi-kun, did I look that sad to you?”

“Hmm, if I had to say... you *should* have,” Koutarou whispered back as he supported her.

In return, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. “I love you, Satomi-kun.” She offered him love, not thanks, for she felt his actions had come from a place of love as well.

“What’s the matter all of a sudden?” he asked.

“You wouldn’t take me seriously unless I said it at a time like this, would you?” she asked in turn.

Koutarou was in the painful process of trying to choose one of the girls. Because of that, he ordinarily wouldn’t have accepted such a loving gesture. He’d abandoned that stance for the moment, however. He was putting himself out there for Shizuka’s sake.

“Will you come to my parents’ grave with me the next time I visit?”

“Yes.”

Koutarou had no idea of the significance of that trip to Shizuka, but he understood that it was important to her. He didn’t hesitate at all to agree to it.

After parting ways with Koutarou, the girls returned to their snack shop raid mission. Sanae-san held the list in hand and Sanae-chan browsed the shelves for what she wanted as the group walked through the store.

“What did Koutarou say to you back there?” Sanae-chan asked.

“To buy some extra cola and candy,” Sanae-san answered.

“He never grows up,” Sanae-nee muttered. The Koutarou in this world was just like the one from hers. He was as childish as ever.

“I think it’s kinda cute that boys are like that,” Shizuka interjected with a smile bright enough to dispel shadows. She saw it in a positive light, although his behavior had no doubt colored her opinion. Koutarou always did what he needed to when it was important, so she had an easy time overlooking his other

dalliances and screwups. “We girls tend to mature too fast, right?”

“I can’t really say we’ve grown up either,” Sanae-chan replied.

“There’s actually quite a few requests for candy on here, so let’s buy lots of it,” Sanae-san added.

“Ahahaha! It’s true. That side of us never changes.”

Indeed, there was a side to the girls that stubbornly refused change as well. Koutarou had a hard time understanding it, so he could use any sympathy he could get from them—or so the Sanaes thought to themselves as they watched Shizuka load up the basket with candy.

“What’s wrong?” Shizuka asked when she noticed Sanae-nee rubbing her face.

“It’s nothing,” she replied, shaking her head with a smile. “I just got something in my eye.”

“I see. Could you come over here for a moment?” Shizuka said, pulling a handkerchief from her bag. Sanae-nee was actually a little older, but Shizuka treated her just like the Sanaes of this world.

“Sure thing.” Sanae-nee approached as requested.

Shizuka peered at her face. “You’ll hurt your eyes if you rub them too much... but I think you’re okay. It looks like your tears flushed out whatever it was,” she said with a smile as she wiped her dear friend’s cheek.

In truth, Shizuka knew why Sanae had really been rubbing her eyes. Just as Shizuka had been before, Sanae was thinking back on happy times. That was why Shizuka wanted to do something for Sanae, just as Koutarou had done for her.

“Thank you, Shizuka.”

“It’s only natural.”

“But I’m not this world’s Sanae.”

“It doesn’t matter what world’s Sanae you are to me.”

“Shizuka...”

Sanae-nee felt like a stranger in this foreign world. Even though it was so familiar, it wasn't hers. The people who lived here weren't the people she knew. That made her lonely—but Shizuka wanted her to know that she wasn't alone. She was still a Sanae, after all.

"I'm sure everyone else feels the same way," said Shizuka. "Including Satomikun, of course."

"Th-Thanks... I feel a little better now."

Fortunately, Shizuka had successfully gotten her message across. A smile returned to Sanae-nee's face. She had lost a lot, but she could see now that she didn't have to go it by herself.

"Give love to all Sanaes! We demand equal treatment!"

"Why do you always have to say unnecessary things at times like this, Sanae-chan?!"

The girls would soon be headed to Forthorthe, and Sanae Onee-chan would need to reclaim what she had lost from the enemy they'd face there. There was no time for tears. Now was the time to stand tall with her newfound allies. That was the determination fueling her smile now.

With Koutarou and the girls about to leave for Forthorthe, there arose a question of who would manage relations between the empire, Folsaria, and the underground while they were gone. It was ultimately decided that the three nations would resolve any issues that came up between themselves. They were accordingly arranging technical training together and joint exercises to learn each other's strengths and weaknesses—and how to cover for each other. Koutarou, Ruth, Clan, Yurika, and Kiriha were taking part in the joint training today as field experts.

"I'm sorry to make you come all this way, Nana-sama," Ruth apologized.

"It's fine. Thanks for letting us borrow Satomi-san."

Ruth was participating in the anti-mobile weapon training aboard Warlord III-Revised, which had been updated with a second seat in the cockpit. Today's exercise would additionally serve as a test run for the machine. She wanted to

confirm that there were no handling issues with the new setup. And since Koutarou was taking part in the anti-personnel combat training, Nana was filling in for him as Ruth's pilot. Her artificial limbs could control Warlord III-Rev just like Koutarou's armor. Still, prodigy or not, this was Nana's first time piloting the machine. She would only hold up with Ruth's help.

"Master is running back and forth all over the place today."

"Ahaha, so we aren't the only ones."

When Nana said "we," she meant the Imperial Army forces she'd come with that would be remaining on Earth. Nana was currently on loan to Forthorthe and serving as Nefilforan's adjutant. Nefilforan's unit would be returning to Forthorthe with Koutarou and the others, so they weren't taking part in the joint training exercise.

"Being able to fight with so many techniques is a special skill only Master has."

"Yet going around acting like he's the weakest is just like him..."

"I think the only one who could beat Master when he's fully armed is Shizuka-sama in dragon form."

"Well, that's kind of cheating... Satomi-san really is the strongest, huh?"

"He would be if he only aimed for weak points."

"What do you mean?"

"He believes in fighting fair."

"Ahahaha, that's the Blue Knight for you."

Ruth and Nana chatted away inside Warlord III-Rev as they fought. They were serving as the "enemy" leader, so the imperial soldiers were primarily fixated on them. They were under heavy fire, although one would never know based on their conversation. Their abilities coupled with Warlord-III Rev's performance allowed them to handle the imperial soldiers with ease. The goal of this exercise, however, was for the trainees to improve over the course of the day. This would be the only time Ruth and Nana could talk so leisurely.

"Say, I've been meaning to ask... Why has this become a two-seater? Satomi-

san piloted it solo before,” Nana remarked, cocking her head and glancing over at Ruth in the newly added copilot’s chair.

The cockpits of mobile weapons tended to be cramped, and that went double for Warlord III-Rev with the addition of a second seat. Nana and Ruth were so close that if they leaned even a little, their faces would touch. Nana had wondered if that was really okay.

“It’s due to highly political circumstances... Actually, I would prefer if you kept this to yourself, but Kiriha-sama rode with Master like this in our battle the other day for tactical reasons—and certain parties were envious.”

“Ahaha, so you wanted to do it too.”

“Yes.”

In the fight with the black hound, Kiriha had boarded Warlord III with Koutarou to attract the enemy’s attention. Tayuma abhorred both Koutarou and Kiriha, and his fire would have been unpredictable if he’d split it between them. That was how Kiriha had come up with the idea to stick with Koutarou in order to make the enemy easier to read. It was solid strategic thinking, although there were those who doubted her exact motivations. This had given rise to jealousy, and so a copilot’s chair was installed.

“That’s how it came to be, but I believe it’s a very powerful addition—tactically speaking,” Ruth explained.

“What do you mean?” Nana asked.

“We each have our own unique abilities, so by adding this second seat, we can provide additional enhancements to Warlord III-Rev.”

“So if Princess Theia were to ride along, it would be specialized for bombardment. And if Maki-san did, it would be specialized for magical combat. They can use their powers on the front lines as Satomi-san protects them. That does sound strong.”

Theia and Maki were skilled in marksmanship and magic respectively, and if they could fight without having to worry about defending themselves, they would be that much more powerful. Riding along in Warlord afforded them that protection, meaning they’d maximize their combat potential alongside

Koutarou.

“But the most effective of all would have to be Kiriha-sama as a mobile command post,” Ruth insisted.

“Because she can command from safety?” asked Nana. “It’s true that the commander’s post is typically loaded with all kinds of reconnaissance sensors, so that would kind of be like cheating.”

Indeed, the advantages weren’t limited to Theia and Maki. Kiriha, Yurika, and Sanae would each provide benefits of their own as well. Nana was starting to see the logic to the second seat. She objected to the idea that Kiriha would be the best copilot, however.

“In truth, I think that *you* would be the strongest addition, Ruth-san,” she said.

“What? Me?” Ruth stammered.

“With you aboard, you would be able to control a bunch of unmanned crafts on the front line even with jamming in effect. The Motor Knights are a sort of unmanned craft, so it’s a perfect match.”

Ruth was a skilled operator, which was typically a rearline role. She was talented at controlling and firing all kinds of machines and cannons, and she’d done so to great effect in many battles. But since jamming was a common tactic in space warfare, her usefulness in combat was often hampered. That would change if she were riding in Warlord. As long as she was on the battlefield herself, she would be able to operate unmanned crafts and automated turrets even with jamming in play. If she wanted to be extra cautious, she could even use laser or wired transmissions to reach them. Her options opened up considerably.

“Riding with Master...”

The seed Nana planted in Ruth filled her head with ideas. She could use her forte to help Koutarou seize victory. And she could repel all possible threats to him—nothing mattered more to her than that.

“I’m entrusting the controls to you.”

“W-Wait, Ruth-san!”

Ruth suddenly relinquished control to Nana and the AI and began working on something else. Warlord III-Rev on its own was more than enough for the trainees to handle, as the AI that Ruth had created was a force to be reckoned with. That alone was proof of her abilities, and now she’d put her mind to creating something even stronger.

Satomi-san sure is loved, heh... But I’m going to give him a piece of my mind later!

As a result, Nana was left to struggle on her own for a while.

Once the anti-mobile weapon training was over, Ruth began polishing her ideas for Warlord III-Rev in earnest. Nana had nothing better to do, so she decided to check in on the other training sessions. She made her way over to the anti-magic training that Yurika was leading. As always, she was interested in what her disciple was up to.

“Oh no! Instructor Yurika is advancing!”

“Where?!”

“It’s the Yurika Attack! I can see grenades all over!”

“Fire back with the Yurika Launcher!”

“Everyone, get down!”

As Nana approached the training field, she held her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun as she scanned the grounds. There were all sorts of obstacles set up like a mock city, and imperial troops were engaged in a fierce back and forth with Rainbow Heart soldiers.

“Look at them go at it. Seems fun,” Nana remarked.

There were spectating trainees all around, excitedly watching the show while on their breaks or as they waited for their own turn on the field. As much as she loathed her reputation, Yurika had gained quite a following. Someone had even named the move where she teleported in a spread of grenades in a geometric pattern. They called it the “Yurika Attack,” and a special grenade launcher had

been invented to replicate it. The technical staff on the Forthorthian side was itching to record more of Yurika's tactics and share them with Forthorthe.

"W-Wait, men! The grenades are holograms!"

"They got us! Look alive! They're attacking with standard infantry now!"

"They're already on us! Fire!"

The mock battles between the two sides typically played out with Folsaria's soldiers taking the initiative with their creative assaults and Forthorthe counterattacking. Folsaria was one step ahead thanks to their mobility, camouflage, and magic, but Forthorthe wouldn't take a beating lying down. They had the advantage in terms of technology, and if they set their minds to defending and intercepting their enemy, they were surprisingly tenacious and could gain the upper hand against the lightly armored Folsarian magicians.

"So Folsaria needs to work on their defenses and Forthorthe on taking the initiative. It's clear what their homework will be."

Nana was satisfied. She'd been transferred from Folsaria to Forthorthe, so both sides were important to her. She hoped they would learn from the day's exercises.

"I imagine they'll have even more homework once the People of the Earth join the fray. I'll need to keep a close eye on things."

Nana's watchful eyes turned sharp—this was the face of a genius magical girl. Even though she was retired, fate had returned her to the line of duty as a commander. She now wielded troops instead of magic, but her talents would come in handy for this job as well. Indeed, the prodigious Nana was back in action.

When Yurika stopped by the rest area after the mock battle, Nana greeted her with a sports drink in hand.

"Good work out there, Yurika-chan."

"Thank you, Nana-san."

Yurika thanked her master for both the drink and for the compliment. She

happily opened the bottle and downed its contents. The heated battle had left her parched.

“Heh, you’re welcome. Although, I have to say, it’s rare to see you train of your own volition.”

Yurika had actually volunteered to lead the anti-magic training. It was for her own good, but it was nevertheless rare for her to suggest such a thing.

“I know that I can’t get complacent with where I am now. I need to be able to defeat that wrinkly old man.”

It was the resurrection of Grand Wizard Grevanas that had inspired Yurika to start training. His strength came from his vast experience and the many battles he’d fought as a court magician. He had immense mana—and he knew how to use it. Yurika wanted to be able to say the same. If she couldn’t face Grevanas on equal footing, the lich would undoubtedly get the better of her. She was thus training as hard as possible to level the playing field.

“That’s a good attitude, Yurika-chan. Keep it up and you won’t have to worry about Maki-san stealing your seat as archwizard out from under you.”

“She’s about to?!” Yurika’s eyes went wide. She and Maki were both assigned to Blue Tower, so if Maki were to become an archwizard, it would mean taking Yurika’s position.

“Ahaha, a little birdy told me that there was a discussion along those lines.”

Nana had been surprised to hear the rumor herself, especially given the objections to Maki joining Rainbow Heart in the first place. Her accomplishments since that time, however, spoke for themselves. Rainbow Heart had to reconsider that she was the kind of magician they’d been waiting for all along. With the apprehension regarding Maki resolved, her reputation continued to soar. She was serious and careful when it came to her work, and her conduct always conveyed deep sincerity. Yurika’s questionable personality begged the question of whether Maki would be a better fit for the title of archwizard. There had yet to be an official meeting on the matter, but word was that the idea had been floated.

“No way! I could never win against Maki-chan!” Yurika could barely get her

head around the rumors, but she'd always felt that Maki was the better magical girl. She couldn't offer much of an argument in her own defense.

"Don't worry. Here you are leading special training all on your own accord. As long as you're mindful of your position as archwizard, the higher-ups are sure to notice."

"Really...?" Yurika slumped her shoulders and cast her eyes downward.

"There's no need to worry, Yurika," called a new voice. "See over there? How many of those people are here to watch you?"

When Yurika heard those words, she immediately looked back up.

"They all shouted in excitement over everything you did. There are even people here to gather data on you, like me. That's not something we do for fun—it's out of respect."

The new arrival on the scene was Clan. She was participating as a technical advisor for Forthorthe, and she was additionally helping Yurika with her training by recording her matches. That was how she knew so many people had been watching her all this time.

"S-Still, they aren't watching me as a magical girl," Yurika protested.

"It doesn't matter how they see you. What's important is that you have the power to protect people. Isn't that right?"

"Y-Yes, I think so too!" Yurika nodded repeatedly at Clan's wisdom, which struck a chord with her. Her energy and enthusiasm were returning.

"Besides..." Clan walked up to Yurika and whispered, "All that matters is that *he* sees you as a magical girl, right?"

Yurika stared at Clan in wide-eyed surprise, and Clan smiled in return. Yurika's face then slowly turned red.

"You think so? Hmm, maybe... That's what Satomi-san said before."

Blushing furiously, Yurika began fidgeting. She adored romance manga, but when it came to her own love life, she was as naive as could be. She squirmed as she imagined all kinds of things. More importantly, she'd gotten over her doubts and worries.

“Well, if you understand, then get going! There are people waiting for you!”

“Y-Yes!”

Clan smacked Yurika on the butt, causing her to jump up in an about-face. She could see troops gathering once again on the field. The next match was about to start.

“And if possible, could you use the new spell I taught you? I’m sure it will elevate your reputation as a magical girl.”

“I understand! I’ll be off, then!”

Back in form, Yurika ran off with light steps. She looked like she might fall a few times, but that was just how she always was. There was no need to worry anymore.

“Thank you, Princess Clan,” said Nana.

“Such a slip of the tongue isn’t like you,” returned Clan.

“I suppose I let my guard down...”

“Heh. Rather than being a perfect girl, having some flaws makes you more desirable.”

“I’ll try to think of it that way.”

After this brief exchange, the two remaining girls smiled at each other. Clan’s expression, however, shortly turned serious again. Since this was a good opportunity, there was something else she wanted to talk to Nana about.

“By the way, Nana... That girl really is special, isn’t she?” she asked.

Nana’s expression also turned serious as she nodded. She had an inkling of what Clan was getting at. “Yes, I was really surprised when I first noticed Yurika-chan’s talents too.”

“As I suspected, she’s special even among magicians, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she really stands out from the crowd. It’s like she was destined to become a magical girl.”

Yurika was ordinary no matter how you looked at her. She was just a normal manga-loving girl who wasn’t in the best of shape. That had also been Nana’s

first impression of Yurika, but there had been signs. When they first met, for example, Nana had noticed that Yurika was overflowing with mana even though she was well beyond the age considered trainable—and the results spoke for themselves. Nana had resolved to teach her the basics in order to defend herself, but Yurika absorbed everything Nana taught her like a sponge. Indeed, it was as if it was simply meant to be.

“She was easily able to make highly toxic chemicals after I taught her the slightest bit about them,” Clan confessed.

“Not even I could do that—it takes too much mana. Wait, what about those chemicals?” Nana asked.

“They were dangerous, of course, so I stopped her before she was able to finish... But it wouldn’t surprise me if she could easily synthesize banned chemical weapons.”

Clan had been helping Yurika both with her training and as a teacher of sorts. She thought Yurika would be even stronger if she was a little more inventive with her magic, so she’d had her try her hand at mixing chemicals. Yurika had successfully followed Clan’s instructions to a tee. Excited by the results, Clan had pushed her to try increasingly drastic things... right up until she’d had to call the whole experiment off before it got out of hand.

“You’re saying Yurika-chan doesn’t seem like a master magician because she lacks the knowledge and experience to go with her talent and magic?”

“But of course. What teenage girl knows anything about chemical weapons?”

“And right now, she’s in the process of learning...”

Nana turned her attention to Yurika as the next mock battle began. When she raised her staff, she was like a beacon for the Rainbow Heart troops and a wall to the opposing underground troops. She was doing everything in her power to gain the experience she was lacking.

“That’s why you were the only one to notice her potential, Nana.”

“Maybe so. Honestly, I felt it would be dangerous to let her be.”

“Yes, I shudder at the thought of her power being used for evil.”

By the time Nana had picked up on Yurika's natural talents, she knew it would be better to bring her into Rainbow Heart's fold for her own protection. If not, it only would have been a matter of time before a villainous force found her. And when Nana thought about what might become of the world—much less Yurika herself—she hadn't been able to leave the fledgling magical girl alone.

"Satomi-san needs to keep a firm hold on her reins," Nana warned. "One wrong turn could spell disaster."

Right now, Yurika was in the process of learning by experimenting with new magic. For instance, Clan had just taught her an extremely effective wide-range attack by lowering the oxygen in a given area. It could incapacitate any number of enemies with only the slightest expenditure of mana. Not being able to get enough oxygen in the demanding heat of battle was like drowning on land—and the attack was practically undetectable. Used on a large enough scale with ritual magic, it could massacre an entire army.

"There's no need to worry. Veltlion set even me on the straight and narrow. Yurika will never stray," Clan assured Nana.

"Heh, you're right. We can leave everything to him."

Nana thought back ten years to when she'd first thought Koutarou was a necromancer and reflected on how wrong she'd been. There was no way he would ever let Yurika stray. Nana was certain Clan was right about that.

About then, a chime rang from Clan's bracelet and her AI reported, "Your Highness, you have a message from Ruthkania Pardomshiha."

"From Pardomshiha? Hmm, well let's have it."

"As you wish, my princess."

"Wh-What is this?!"

When the message opened, Clan flinched. Normally one or two holographic windows would open, but right now, they were spamming open one after another.

"Plans for a backpack for Warlord III-Rev...?" Clan adjusted her glasses and began reading through Ruth's message.

“Ah...” Nana muttered. She had a bad feeling about where this was going.

“The backpack’s primary function will be storing arms and additional communications equipment... It holds a large number of unmanned crafts... Adds and improves comms... I see! This is for when Pardomshiha is riding along!”

Ruth had sent Clan specifications for additional gear she’d want when aboard Warlord with Koutarou. Clan’s job would be to generate blueprints based on Ruth’s documents. This was their standard procedure when creating new equipment.

“Oh dear... I knew it.” Nana scratched her head with an unusually bitter expression, which made her look a little like Yurika. She then said nervously, “I- It seems you’ll be busy, Princess Clan.”

“You could say that again. This is a big job...”

Nana knew Clan would find out the truth eventually, so she decided to go ahead and confess. “I’m sorry. This is all because I said something unnecessary to Ruth-san.”

“*You* put this idea in her head?!”

“I’m sorry! All I said was that I thought she’d be the strongest copilot for Warlord!”

Nana was referencing her earlier conversation with Ruth, who was normally modest and quite rational. Whenever it came to Koutarou, however, she got a sort of tunnel vision. And that was exactly how Clan had ended up with specifications for new gear in her hands.

“Nana, you’re acting strange today. I’m already busy, and this is just...”

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Nana apologized profusely. First there was Yurika, and now there was Ruth. While the former was perhaps inevitable, the latter had totally been avoidable. Nana had created a string of headaches for Clan that was potentially about to get a lot longer.

“And if Theiamillis-san hears about this, she’ll demand a version for extra

firepower.”

“That might not be the end of it...”

“...”

“I’m sorry! Really, I’m so sorry!”

Today was a busy day for Clan. She was acting as a technical advisor, teacher, coach, and much more. But it was clear that tomorrow and the many days after that were going to be just as hectic.

The joint training exercises were between Forthorthe, Folsaria, and the People of the Earth, so Japan wasn’t explicitly participating. The Sun Rangers had been specially invited, however. They were more or less an independent faction, but they did technically serve the Japanese government. They were thus the only representatives from Earth, making them a very special presence indeed.

“Thank you very much! My kid will love this!” one soldier cried, bowing to Kenichi repeatedly. He’d asked all of the Sun Rangers for their autographs. The rangers had been hesitant at first, but when the soldier said his son was a big fan, they could hardly refuse.

“Er, I couldn’t be more honored... Let’s train hard out there together,” Kenichi replied bashfully.

“Of course! I want to make my boy proud!” the soldier said before taking his leave.

“It looks like you’ve gotten quite popular, Sun Rangers,” Kiriha observed as she walked over. The Sun Rangers primarily used spiritual energy technology, so they had an advisory tech team on tap that included Kiriha. She approached with the group of technicians, who greeted the Sun Rangers before moving on, leaving only Kiriha behind.

“Just two years ago, we were totally worthless... It’s kinda crazy to think about,” Hayato replied with a wry smile.

The soldier who’d just left hadn’t been the only one to ask for an autograph,

handshake, or a photo. Underground dwellers were approaching them regularly. In the past, the Sun Rangers were widely frowned upon as a waste of tax money, but now they were now the stars behind the anti-invader department. Their reputation had skyrocketed. The People of the Earth were especially fond of them and treated them like heroes. They would never forget how the Sun Rangers had fought for them.

“You’ll just have to get used to it,” said Kiriha. “You’ve earned it.”

“I’m honored,” Hayato replied, his smile transforming. He still felt a little weird receiving so much praise from the underground dwellers, but he was indeed proud.

“By the way, Black Rose-san, thank you for coming all this way for us,” offered Kotaro, the youngest of the Sun Rangers, with a deep bow on behalf of his older team members who’d yet to show her any respect.

Kiriha smiled and bowed in return. “My, how polite. I only know how to use the technology, so despite being part of the tech team, I’m mostly here for appearances. The technicians are the ones doing all the work, so defer your thanks to them.”

“You could say we’re here for decoration, ho!”

“Ho! We are haniwas, after all!”

Everyone knew Kiriha was as sharp as a tack, but that didn’t make her an expert on spiritual energy technology. She generally understood its construction and how to use it, but nothing more advanced than that. So rather than acting as a technician on the team, she was largely just supervising the People of the Earth.

“Ahaha, we’re in the same position, Black Rose-san, so I think you’re the perfect person to thank,” Megumi said with a smile.

The Sun Rangers themselves weren’t receiving any technical training. That’s what their tech team had come for. At most, they’d be learning how to use new tools and techniques after the fact, so Megumi understood exactly how Kiriha felt.

A warm and friendly mood overtook the group, but one of the Sun Rangers

was still worried. It was their most considerate member, Daisaku. “Are you sure about this though, Black Rose-san? Weren’t you concerned about the spiritual energy technology falling into the hands of the Japanese government?”

It wasn’t just spiritual energy technology. Folsaria, Forthorthe, and the People of the Earth were all afraid of their respective technologies leaking into Japan—even on a governmental level. That was why only the Sun Rangers had been invited to the training retreat, and it gave Daisaku pause.

Kiriha smiled gently at him. “It’s true that we don’t fully trust the Japanese government. We know that they have good intentions in general, but with such a large organization, there are inevitably bad actors mixed within their ranks.”

Given the size of the nation’s government, there was no guarantee that every member meant well. There were undoubtedly those out for personal gain or simply money. There was also the possibility of double agents. So while the Japanese government was fully cooperating with the invaders at the moment, the invaders were still rightfully concerned about potential security compromises. Better safe than sorry, after all. And the Japanese government understood their caution.

“So... why us?” Kenichi asked on the heels of Daisaku’s question. He’d been wondering as much since they were invited.

“We trust you. We trust in the Sun Rangers,” Kiriha declared with a calm smile. “Do we need any other reason?”

The Sun Rangers were at a loss for words. Kiriha’s belief in them was profound confirmation that they’d done the right thing. The joy and surprise they felt over it left them speechless.

The first to manage a reply after a minute or so was Hayato. “That’s Black Rose-san for you... You really are different.”

“I wish I had a girlfriend like that,” Kotaro followed, blurting out his true feelings. His wide eyes were fixed on Kiriha.

“Nah, Kotaro,” said Hayato. “We’re no match for her.”

“I know that. I’m no Baron-san. I’d be happy with just a day.”

“Yeah, a day would be nice. That would give me something to brag about.”

Hayato and Kotaro could hardly believe that Kiriha was younger than them. She was mature, persuasive, and resolute. She already possessed all the qualities of a good leader.

Hearing their praise, however, put a small smirk on Kiriha’s face. “If you must know, I have my reasons. While we’re away, we’ll need someone to protect Earth. And we need that someone, or someones, to be as strong as possible.”

The Sun Rangers were moved by Kiriha’s faith in them, but that faith was also calculated to a certain degree. While the Corona House crew was in Forthorthe, the Sun Rangers would be charged with protecting the planet from any enemies that might appear. Indeed, they needed to be as strong as possible. Forthorthe, Folsaria, and the underground all agreed on that.

“But you still trusted us enough to choose us. So it’s the same thing,” Kenichi replied with a smile.

Somebody inevitably needed to fill the void the Corona House crew would leave—the only question had been a matter of who. So even if Kiriha’s choice had been a calculated one, the fact remained that she had picked the Sun Rangers over anyone else. In short, she trusted them to protect the planet and responsibly handle any technology they were entrusted with to do it.

“Thanks to that, my Sun Diver is being repaired,” Daisaku laughed.

He’d been forced to self-destruct his multipurpose submarine, the Sun Diver, in the raid on Ralgwin’s base. The Forthorthians remembered that selfless act, so they’d offered to use their advanced technology to repair it. Daisaku and the Sun Rangers had happily agreed. The Sun Diver, after all, was one of the legs to the giant robot they used in combat, the Sun Fighter. Once the Sun Diver was back on line, they’d be able to use the Sun Fighter again too. It would greatly increase the Sun Ranger’s combat options and prowess.

“We’ll also be updating your comms, so it should be easier for you to work with us,” Kiriha added.

Each of the three factions had decided to contribute upgrades to the Sun Rangers’ Sun Machines, but unlike the complete overhaul of the destroyed Sun

Diver, these were largely improvements to their comms systems and sensors. Since the relay of information was an integral part of combat, these upgrades would increase their ability to coordinate with their new allies. The sleeker, lighter components used would also have the benefit of making their crafts slightly faster than before.

“Thank you for everything,” said Kenichi, bowing to Kiriha. The mission ahead of him was so important that the kindness being extended by all three factions moved him to tears.

“This is for everyone’s sake and not just yours,” replied Kiriha. “If you’d like to show your gratitude, do it with results.”

“Yes!”

Kenichi’s fighting spirit burned anew in his heart. He’d once thought that his dream of protecting people was all but lost, but through a playful twist of faith, he was now getting another chance. Whether or not he seized the opportunity was up to him, and he was more than ready to rise to the challenge. The other Sun Rangers felt the same way.

“Black Rose-san really is great,” said Hayato.

“I wish we could trade Professor Roppongi for her,” said Kotaro.

“There’s no way that would happen.”

“I know.”

Once the serious talk of work was over, the mood relaxed a little. Megumi took the opportunity to walk over to Kiriha with a smile. “By the way, Black Rose-san, how are things going with Baron-san?”

Kiriha was momentarily stunned by the abrupt question, but she quickly calmed herself and smiled back. “No developments, I’m afraid. He’s so earnest that it’s giving me a hard time.”

“Well, he *is* a living legend.” Megumi groaned and folded her arms, then cast a glance next to her. “I’m glad that I have Daisaku-san.”

“I’m just a normal guy, after all.”

Megumi and Daisaku had started dating a while back, but she didn’t think

things would be so easy for Baron Demon and Black Rose. Koutarou was a hero of legend—with all the baggage that came with it.

“Still, to us underground dwellers, you Sun Rangers are heroes too,” Kiriha reminded them.

“Oh, I guess so, huh?” mused Megumi.

Although Koutarou was a hero, he still thought of himself as a normal guy just like Daisaku did. And because he tried to behave like one, he hadn’t made much progress in his relationship with Kiriha.

“I’d say the problem is his lack of awareness—or maybe he’s really *too* conscious,” she complained.

Koutarou had a strong desire to set a good example. He couldn’t bring himself to do anything that might disgrace his title as Alaia’s knight, even if that was what Alaia herself wanted.

“Also, a real hero wouldn’t pursue their own happiness when the world’s in trouble. We’re putting off getting married too,” added Daisaku.

At first glance, the yellow Sun Ranger appeared to be laid-back and mild-mannered, but he could be determined and quick to action. He’d already proposed to Megumi—but even though she’d said yes, they were putting off the big day. Weddings took time to prepare and plan, and given how busy the two of them were, they simply couldn’t fit it into their schedule at present.

“So we’ll be doing our best until then,” Megumi proclaimed.

“Yeah, I think it’s the right thing to do. Then we can finally get married in bliss,” Daisaku added.

“Oh, Daisaku-san! Not in front of Black Rose-san!”

Daisaku wanted to see their mission through and secure a peaceful future for himself and his bride-to-be. The thought thrilled Megumi, so even though she scolded him for bringing it up, her true feelings were quite clear.

I wonder if Koutarou will be able to make a decision when things are peaceful again...

Looking at the happy couple, Kiriha began thinking of her own future. She

hoped it would be just like theirs.

With all preparations finally complete, Koutarou and the others were at last ready to depart for Forthorthe. The paperwork was done, the arrangements were made, and the luggage was packed. All that was left now was to set out.

“Couldn’t you guys have done something about this...?” Koutarou asked in exasperation when he saw the girls’ bags. It was a veritable mountain. They each had several pieces while Koutarou had but a single backpack.

“This is *after* we already cut it down. There was even more at first,” Yurika explained, spreading her arms wide. The original mountain had apparently been much larger.

“Yeah, so there! We worked really hard to cut it down this much!” Sanae said with a giggle as though it didn’t concern her.

It was no coincidence that Yurika and Sanae had the most luggage out of anyone. Shizuka also would have been a top offender if she hadn’t given up on packing all her dieting supplies.

“If this is seriously your attempt at cutting down, I give up,” Koutarou acquiesced.

“Eehee!”

“You’re the one who said girls need extra time to get ready, Kou. You shouldn’t be surprised,” cut in Kenji.

“Kin-chan and Nalfa-san don’t have that much luggage. In fact, you have more than they do,” Koutarou argued.

Kotori and Nalfa each had a backpack and a wheeled suitcase, just like they were going on a normal trip. So while they technically had more luggage than Koutarou, they’d packed far more reasonably than the other girls.

“What’d you even pack in there, Mackenzie?” Koutarou asked.

“Wait? Just normal stuff like clothes. Plus hair and skin care products.”

“Ah, so you’ve packed to maintain your looks.”

“It’d be a disaster if the products there didn’t work for me.”

“You worry about the strangest things, man.”

At that point, Kotori and Nalfa entered the room. They’d left their suitcases with the Hazy Moon’s crew, so they were only carrying their purses now.

“What were you just saying about us, Kou-niisan?” Kotori asked.

“Oh, you heard that? I was just commenting on how everyone else packed two to three times the luggage you did.”

“Ahaha, Kotori and I were last-minute additions, so we didn’t want to trouble anyone by bringing too much stuff,” Nalfa explained. “If I were returning home on my own spaceship, I might have packed just as much.”

“Your own spaceship...? Yeah, I have no idea what that’s like,” Kotori muttered.

“Heehee, I guess not.”

Kotori was just a normal girl from Earth. Nalfa came from a well-to-do family, but owning their own spaceship—even one considerably less impressive than the Hazy Moon—was extraordinary. Most Forthorthians wouldn’t know what it was like to have one, much less Kotori. The two girls shared a laugh.

“I can’t relate either,” said Koutarou, joining in the laughter. He felt more like Kotori, which shocked a certain someone.

“Koutarou, you could buy your own spaceship, you know?” Theia asked, blinking repeatedly.

“And where would I find the money for that?” he asked in turn.

“In Forthorthe. You could have a different vessel for each day of the year. You could even build a castle with a spaceport.”

“That money might as well not exist. I can’t use it unless Forthorthe is in danger.”

Koutarou had astronomical assets in Forthorthe from the stipend Alaia had left for him and the interest it had accumulated on it over thousands of years. The amount was unprecedented, and the government had long given up on

trying to calculate its actual worth. Whatever the grand total turned out to be, Forthorthe would no doubt have to default on the sum. It had thus been decided that whenever Koutarou requested money, they would provide it for him indefinitely. That saved them the trouble of tabulating his net worth while simultaneously supplying him with virtually unlimited funds.

Koutarou, meanwhile, had no intention of ever using said funds. Alaia had left him a stipend as a sign of trust, and he wouldn't dare resort to it frivolously. He knew she'd intended the money to be used for Forthorthe's sake. He also knew that Forthorthians glorified his purchases to the point that they had a serious impact on the economy. It wasn't like he could simply buy anything he wanted. Moreover, he had a secondary source of funds from the salary Theia awarded him. There was no reason to touch the Forthorthian treasury.

"I'm sure that Empress Alaia wouldn't mind you having a spaceship or castle. What do you say, Harumi?" asked Theia.

"Well, based on the ideals of ancient times, it *would* be somewhat disconcerting if a lord's estate wasn't impressive enough. I'm certain Alaia would have insisted on the propriety of it all."

Harumi shared a soul with Alaia, but they were distinct entities who'd grown up under entirely different circumstances with entirely different personalities. Because of their special connection via Signaltin, however, Harumi possessed Alaia's memories up to the point that she'd parted ways with Koutarou two thousand years ago. Harumi thus had a good understanding of how Alaia thought and felt. When it came to political decisions, she could make them with the utmost confidence on her behalf.

"See? Even she says so," Theia prodded Koutarou

"Sakuraba-senpai!" he cried.

"I'm sorry. It just slipped out."

Though Harumi apologized, she didn't feel too guilty. She'd told the truth, after all, and Koutarou was just being overly serious. She might have apologized to him more sincerely in the past, but she was now smiling playfully. The ribbon tied around her wrist was a little reminder to be a little more forward at times like this.

“Say, Aika-san, what *is* Satomi-kun worth right now?” Shizuka asked curiously, looking to the treasurer of the Satomi Knights.

“I’ve only done rough calculations myself, but I’m pretty sure the interest on it alone exceeds the empire’s budget by a few zeroes.”

Forthorthe would go bankrupt merely trying to pay the interest on Koutarou’s assets. Trying to calculate his net worth beyond that was pointless. Once Maki realized that, she, too, had given up on it.

“I’m no economist, but can’t the government, like, just change the interest rate?” put forward Shizuka.

“That decision would have to come from the central bank, and it would affect economic activity throughout the empire. There could be severe inflation and the value of Forthorthian currency could tank,” Maki explained.

“So that’s not something you can do willy-nilly, huh?” Shizuka mused. She’d been wondering if the government could wriggle out of the interest, but apparently it wasn’t that easy.

“In other words, Koutarou was wise not to touch the stipend and Elfaria-dono was wise not to tamper with economic policy,” Kiriha said in summation.

If either Koutarou or Elfaria had acted differently, Forthorthe would have been in for financial disaster. Thankfully, they’d avoided that.

“I believe Master was just living up to Empress Alaia’s expectations,” Ruth said with a smile. Koutarou had acted chivalrously, and as a knight herself, Ruth was pleased with his behavior.

Clan, meanwhile, was suspicious of Elfaria. “Are you sure that Elfaria-san wasn’t just trying to entangle Veltlion further?” she asked. The empress was always bent on finding new ways to bind Koutarou to Forthorthe, and Clan suspected the debt Forthorthe owed him was another of her schemes.

“I wonder...” mused Theia. “Oh! Speaking of my mother, I need to contact her before we set out.”

Theia immediately began fiddling with her bracelet. At the mention of her mother’s name, she’d remembered this last crucial task before departure. The

group was currently on schedule, so it was just a formality to check in.

When traveling between Earth and Forthorthe, no vessel was faster than a royal-class battleship. With their powerful warp drives, they could make the journey in just ten days. But non-passenger crafts—like communication pods—could make it even faster.

Communication pods were small containers that transported data. Since their only cargo was nonliving, they could skip most of the standard safety protocol for warps involving humans. The only precaution necessary was to avoid populated areas. And because of their small size, many of them could be launched simultaneously to ensure at least one reached the target destination. Of course, that meant classified data couldn't be sent this way. There was no such thing as crack-proof encryption, so there was always a risk of any intelligence being sent via comms pods falling into the wrong hands. This was no concern for a daughter sending a message to her mother, however.

"We've completed all preparations to depart, so we'll be on our way shortly."

That's a lovely smile, Theia...

The pod Elfaria had received contained a message from Theia accompanied by a brief rundown of their itinerary. The message was in the form of a video, so Theia's bright smile was on full display on Elfaria's virtual monitor. In the past, she'd only ever seen her daughter look lonely, but something had changed in her. Now she was beaming. As a mother, Elfaria couldn't have been happier.

"Once we arrive, there's a great deal I'd like to discuss with you. Until then..."

Just as the message was about to end, the real reason for Theia's smile came into view.

"Hey, Theia, we're about to head out."

"I know. I'm just sending a message to Mother, so hold on."

"You're always in such a rush, yet you're the one keeping us waiting."

"Shut it, you! That's the privilege of royalty!"

Theia had changed because of the people she'd met on Earth. And the person

who'd had the biggest influence of all on her was the man she loved. And Elfaria could feel how close they were even through the screen.

"You can't just claim princess privileges whenever it's convenient for you."

"But I *am* a princess."

"Yeah, yeah. Just hurry it up."

"I know!"

Elfaria was indeed happy, but she watched the screen with a complicated expression. Theia was her daughter, but she couldn't help seeing Koutarou as something more than her daughter's partner.

He hasn't changed at all...

After speaking with Theia a little, Koutarou left the frame. Elfaria's eyes followed him with sincere longing.

But you'll never turn my way, Layous-sama...

Theia and Koutarou would be married one day—Elfaria was sure of that, and that she felt that should be enough for her. That was why she'd sent Theia to Earth, after all. But when she thought back on meeting Koutarou twenty years ago, it tugged at her heart.

How pathetic. It's not like I am some teenage girl...

Elfaria knew she was being foolish. Koutarou was meant for Theia, yet there was still a part of her that wanted more. A part of her that wanted him to look at her.

"Ah, hang on. There's something I want to tell Elle too," Koutarou said as he entered the frame again, this time staring straight into the camera.

Layous-sama...?

Elfaria's mind went blank. All Koutarou had done was look into the camera, but it felt like he was looking at her directly. Of course, she knew getting giddy over something so small was silly, but she couldn't change how she felt.

"I bought some local tea I'll be bringing. I mean, it's cheap stuff that I could afford on my part-time pay, so it's probably not fitting to present to an

empress. But I thought it might be fun to compare teas, so you better get yours ready too.”

A warm feeling Elfaria couldn't describe spread through her body. It was the same warmth she'd felt twenty years ago. Of course, Koutarou in the video had no idea.

“Welp, see you,” he said before cutting the video.

The bright, unguarded smile he flashed left a profound impression on Elfaria.

“You are the only one who could tell an empress to have tea waiting for you, Layous-sama...”

She grasped at her chest, almost as if trying to hold something back inside her. With her hand pressed to her heart, she slowly stood up.

“How can you so easily...”

Elfaria then walked over to a cupboard and glanced at her pots and cups through the glass. Tea was her hobby, so there were several sets lined up. The question was which to use. There were plenty of other things to consider too, like which tea to brew.

“When he gets here, I need to punish him...”

Elfaria selected a cup from the cupboard and looked at it from every angle. She then put it back and picked a different one. After that she chose saucers, a pot, and the tea itself, all with the same care. She seemed to be enjoying herself.



Afterword

Long time no see. Takehaya here. I don't have much space for the afterword this time, so let's get right into it.

Volume 40 is finally here! To mark this occasion, BookWalker will be selling a limited *Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Heracles! Branch-off Edition*. Size-wise, it's about half the length of this book. It's also why this volume was delayed by about a month. Poco-san and I wrapped up around the usual time, but there was no way around the 50 percent increase in workload (lol). Not that I have any complaints.

Sorry to keep you all waiting. The special half-volume is a story about everyone going to a summer festival. Nana also gets some time in the spotlight. For anyone interested, check out BookWalker's website. There's also a companion quiz project, so check out BookWalker's, Hobby Japan's, or my Twitter as well. Incidentally, all of the side stories written for BookWalker will also be bundled and sold digitally too.

And on top of everything, the series has now sold 1.5 million copies (digital, manga, and overseas editions included)! This kind of milestone is usually celebrated at the 1 million mark, but due to a major blunder (lol), neither the sales or editing staff were counting, which is why I'm only reporting it now. We don't have anything planned, but I'm still happy to have reached this point with all you readers. I am truly blessed to hit this milestone with this level of visibility. Thank you very much. I hope to enjoy your continued support.

By the way, volume 40 happens to be exactly book number 1,000 in HJ Bunko's serial codes. This means it's the thousandth book they've published. It also means that *Rokujouma* makes up 4 percent of their entire catalog. We've put out a lot of it.

I've now run out of space without even touching on the contents of the book, so allow me to say this in brief—this volume contains three short stories previously published on HJ Bunko's website, and the other half is new material.

Lastly, the acknowledgments. I would like to offer my thanks to everyone at the HJ Bunko editorial department for their help in creating the book; the illustrator, Poco-san, who didn't complain one bit despite the sudden increase in work; and all you readers out there for picking this up.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume 41.

March, 2022

Takehaya

Article 34

The signatory parties of the Corona Convention hereby agree to keep classified any and all information regarding the Sun Rangers' equipment.

Article 34 Postscript

Glasses, is it true that you're gonna fix the Sun Rangers' giant robot?! C-Calm down, Sanae. I was so sad when they said that it can't combine anymore! I'd appreciate it if you didn't put me on the spot like this... But, yes, it's true. Forthorthe, Folsaria, and the People of the Earth are working together to repair it. Heck yeah! Just so you know, this is top secret, so don't go around making a big deal about it. Yeah, sure, of course! Seeing you smile with that gleam in your eye makes me nervous...



Corona Convention

New! September 9th, 2011



Bonus Short Stories

Ruth

Ruth's greatest talent was her ability to organize information, which made her a great cook. She could compare, collate, and consolidate recipes with ease. While she lacked the culinary skills of Kiriha or Shizuka, she surpassed them both in terms of dexterity. So when cooking for a large group, as on days like today, she was the ideal candidate.

"Thanks for the grub!" Sanae cheered. The instant she had her lunch in her hands, she dug right in.

Today's special was nori bento, a well-known Japanese meal of rice topped with seaweed and seasoned with soy sauce. It was served with fried fish, potato salad, and several root vegetables cut into long strips and stir-fried in sesame oil. Ruth had woken up early to prepare it all at Sanae's request. She smiled as she watched Sanae wolf it down with glee.

"And here's yours, Master," she then said as she handed Koutarou his lunch too.

"Thank you," he replied.

"Oh, you've got ginger-fried pork in yours too," Theia remarked.

"There was a little bit of leftover meat from yesterday," Ruth explained.

"I appreciate it, Ruth," said Koutarou. "Thanks!"

Koutarou's lunch was bigger than the girls' since Ruth had taken his appetite into account while making it. It contained a larger serving of rice as well as some added protein because she knew he was a growing boy who was always hungry no matter how much he ate.

"Give me some, Koutarou," Theia demanded.

"Here."

Koutarou heeded Theia's request and fed her a small bit of pork. Her face flushed with delight. Even cold, the pork was delicious.

"You've gotten better at cooking, Ruth," Theia reported.

"You honor me, Your Highness, but I still have a long way to go," Ruth insisted.

"Go on, Koutarou. You tell her too," Theia ordered. "Ruth polished her skills for you, after all."

"I-I didn't—" Ruth tried to protest.

"You *didn't*?" Theia question.

Ruth could hardly argue. Her face turned bright red. She'd enjoyed cooking even before coming to Earth, but nowadays, she put more heart into it than ever before. She was thrilled to hear her loved ones say they liked her cooking.

"Ruth-san, this really is a delicious lunch," Koutarou told her, albeit bashfully. "Thanks for always cooking for us."

Ruth had been diligently making lunches for everyone for over two years now. They were always delicious, and she never cut corners. Though she alternated duties with Kiriha and Shizuka, prepping food for so many people was still a lot of work. She thoroughly deserved the thanks and praise.

"Um, it's my pleasure, Master," she said politely.

"Good for you, Ruth," Theia congratulated her.

Ruth smiled as she nodded in reply, blushing all the while. After all, being acknowledged by the man she loved the most was pure bliss.

Kotori

Koutarou was like an older brother to Kotori. She'd been following him around ever since she was a child, and even after finding out he was a legendary hero, she continued to treat him the same way she always had. This puzzled Nalfa.

"Say, Kotori, what do you think about Koutarou-sama being a hero?" she

decided to ask one day.

“Nothing in particular. Like I said before, he’s still Kou-niisan to me,” Kotori explained between sips of iced coffee through her straw. Nalfa had brought it up casually, so Kotori replied the same way.

“I can’t really imagine how that feels. Can you tell me more?”

“More? Let me think...” Kotori looked upward pensively. After half a minute or so, she smiled and said, “I guess you could say I still see him the same way.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything.”

Indeed, Kotori had only given Nalfa a rehashing of the same answer. Her best friend was still struggling to grasp her meaning. It all made perfect sense to Kotori, however, so she began trying to explain it once again.

“Um, well... Kou-niisan went to Forthorthe and came back a hero, right?” she asked.

“Perfect and invincible,” Nalfa replied. “He saved us during the civil wars both two millennia ago and just last year.”

“But look at him. He’s no different than when he left, so what’s the big deal? Granted, I *was* a little surprised when I first heard the news.”

Koutarou had become a hero, but deep down, he was still the same boy he’d always been. Nothing about him had changed, so nothing about the way Kotori treated him changed. That was her intuitive rationale.

“I mean, I guess he is a little more mature—and open-minded—than he used to be. But he’s still a normal high school student who works a part-time job, so that’s that,” Kotori continued through another sip of her iced coffee.

Nalfa had barely touched her own drink. She just sat staring wide-eyed at Kotori in silence for some time.

“You’re amazing, Kotori,” she eventually said. “You see Koutarou for who he is, while I only ever think about what he is...”

“That’s not true. You see him for who he is too, Nal-chan.”

“I do?”

“Remember what you said that one time? About how he can never ignore someone in need? He always takes a step forward to reach out his hand, and one step at a time, he’s crossed immeasurable distances.” Kotori smiled with her straw still in her mouth. In part, she’d been able to keep her perspective on Koutarou because of what Nalfa had said back then, so she knew that Nalfa had the right perspective too. “I realized you were right.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah. Also, I’m not the amazing one.”

“Huh?”

“That honor has to go to Kiriha-san, Sanae-san, and the other girls. They’re the reason he was able to go back to his old self. If not for that, I think he’d be a different man now.”

“You might be right about that...”

“But you can’t afford to let them outshine you, Nal-chan! You gotta squeeze yourself in there!”

“Y-Yes! I’ll do my best!”

“Attagirl!”

With that out of the way, Kotori took a refreshing sip of her drink. She was quite pleased with herself.

Clan

When Clan first heard that Koutarou had helped Nana take a bath, she could scarcely believe her ears. After some time thinking about it, however, a question emerged in her mind.

“Veltlion, about the thing with Nana the other day...”

“Man, you guys sure love bringing that up. But ask all you want—nothing happened.”

“That’s not what I was going to ask about.”

“Oh?”

Koutarou was doing his homework at the tea table, but there, he looked up at Clan. She looked every bit as serious as she sounded.

“I was wondering if Nana’s the reason you suggested making the PAF available to the public.”

“Oh, that...” Koutarou smiled a little.

The Power Assistance Field, or PAF, was an invention of Clan’s that used low-output barriers to enhance and mimic human movement. Koutarou had been looking into making it available in Forthorthe, and Clan had grown curious about whether Nana’s condition had inspired the idea.

“Well?” she prompted him.

“You’re right on the mark. It occurred to me that Nana-san would’ve been able to get in the bath on her own if she had a PAF.”

“You should’ve acted on it sooner, then.”

“You idiot. I couldn’t give a clever fox like you any ideas back then.”

“Which is it? Am I an idiot or am I clever? Either way, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Anyways, that thought kinda stuck with me, so when Kiriha-san said that I should have a reason for returning to Forthorthe, it was the first thing that came to mind.”

“So I was right. Thanks, Veltlion. Sorry for bugging you while you’re doing homework.”

Satisfied with Koutarou’s answer, Clan ended the conversation and began to brew some tea.

“No sweat. But hey, if you’re making tea, make some for me too.”

“Do you really think I’m that cold? I was going to all along.”

“Thanks.”

“Just be patient.”

Koutarou quietly watched Clan as she made tea, but he spoke up when something crossed his mind. “By the way, Clan, make a PAF for Nana-san when

you can. She could use it when she removes her prosthetics.”

“I don’t mind, but I think Nana would say that she doesn’t need it.”

“Why?”

“There’s something nice about feeling the warmth of others, like Yurika or Kanae.”

“Huh, yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Still, it wouldn’t be bad to have one in case of an emergency.”

“True. I’ll leave that to you, then.”

“Certainly.”

After that, the couple sat in silence for a time as Koutarou continued his homework and Clan flipped through the pages of an RC magazine. Though they didn’t speak, the slow passage of time together was pleasant. After half an hour, Koutarou looked up at Clan.

“Say, Clan...”

“Is something the matter?”

“You’re a pretty good girl.”

“What are you on about all of a sudden?”

“I mean, I don’t really know how to say this... but I know you’re not cold.”

“I most certainly was two years ago—and you’re the reason I changed,” Clan said with a smile.

She understood that she was a different person now, and she knew that what had inspired her growth was the boy sitting right in front of her. And more than anything, she was happy that he could rely on her now.

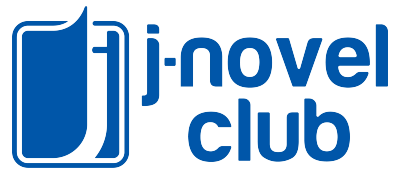












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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 40

by Takehaya

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